

Epiphany 2
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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The Call of God

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in an address to the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom in Washington DC, on the evening of May 17, 1957, challenged people to appeal to the government for access to the vote. He wrote among many things, the following.

Keep moving. Let nothing slow you up. Move on with dignity and honor and respectability. I realize that it will cause restless nights sometime. It might cause losing a job; it will cause suffering and sacrifice. It might even cause physical death for some. But if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children from a permanent life of psychological death, then nothing can be more Christian.

King's sense of call was radical. It was personal and it was communal. It weighed upon him to the point of totally consuming him, but it wasn't about him. Before this passage he said, "Go back to [your homes] with that faith today, that the universe is on our side in the struggle." It was a calling rooted solidly in God.

Today's readings are all about living God's call. In the first lesson, God calls the boy Samuel to be judge and prophet, who will eventually anoint the first kings of Israel, shifting the nation away from the arbitrary nature of the rule of the judges, to something more organized and systematic. It was a system that worked only when the king understood his role as a call from God.

In the Epistle lesson Paul talks about the call of the Christian in first-century Rome. Fertility rites in pagan temples in Corinth involved temple prostitutes. So woven into the fabric of society at the time were these temples, that Christians followed the social patterns, not thinking about the implications for their newfound faith in Christ. St. Paul is clear: No, the call of the Christian is different. For the Christian, human bodies are temples to Christ. Our calling is to love as we have been loved by Christ.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus is calling his first disciples. He goes to Galilee and calls Philip, who calls Nathaniel. When Nathaniel hears Jesus tells him stuff he didn't have any way of knowing, he recognizes the Messiah. Philip was always bringing people to Jesus. He brought the boy with five loaves and two fish that Jesus multiplied in the desert. Some Greeks wanted to see Jesus, so Philip and Andrew took them and made introductions. Tradition says he was martyred in Hierapolis as a missionary. Christian tradition and legend have Nathaniel taking the Gospel to northern India after Pentecost,

and calling more people into the fellowship of Jesus.

How, then, must we understand our calling? God calls communities first. When the Waorani people of eastern Ecuador first turned to Christ, they learned that revenge killings were no longer necessary. Christ had willingly given himself for them. Who, then, can avenge the death of someone willing to die? No, peace was Christ's new way. A young man of the first community to come to Christ felt a call to go to a remote longhouse where they did not know about Christ. He knew he could be killed by the distant village, but he felt called to go—if he died, he would do so like Christ. The community commissioned and sent him. They got word that he made contact, and then communication ceased. He had been martyred.

The community mourned him, but did not avenge him. That distant community has now been contacted peacefully. I can't imagine the impact of knowing that nobody was coming after THEM with spears after what they had done.

Divine call is always set in the context of community. King, Samuel, the Christians in Corinth, and Jesus' disciples were all called TO something and FOR something. I knew a guy one time who was convinced he had a calling to the priesthood. I took him to see the bishop who told him "No way, no how." Unhappy with the response, the guy went out on his own. He bought vestments and altar equipment, and he began celebrating communion in his home. It never went very far, because it wasn't set in community. It's always in community.

Divine call is always a call to follow the Spirit of Christ. I remember like it was yesterday, though it was a good many years ago. A woman came to our fellowship in deep south Texas. I assured her that she was welcome at the table of the Lord. I am welcome, you are welcome, we are all welcome, for God loves all of us equally. Her own tradition had taught her she was not worthy. When I placed the wafer in her hands she burst out in tears! Sometimes it's that nice, but sometimes it's not. Our pride flag has been stolen twice. I received an angry phone call once by someone driving by who couldn't understand why a Christian church would fly such a thing. We do so because we are answering our call to love as we have been loved.

When you combine community with the Spirit of Jesus you get what Samuel strove for, what Paul preached about, what King inspired people to struggle for, and what our Presiding Bishop calls "Beloved Community." In King's speech I quoted and in a hundred other places, he reminds us that this Beloved Community is not just a movement behind a political agenda, it is a call to love as Christ has loved us, sacrificially, earnestly and honestly, with all the socio-political implications it brings.

There are social and political implications, for some laws in our land reflect a different kind of call, one toward self, especially the preservation and elevation of the White self.

Then there are the myriad ways we work unconsciously out of our collective ethnocentrism. For example, in a recent conversation with other clergy serving small congregations, someone asked how many of us serve ethnic congregations. I almost raised my hand and said, "I serve two ethnic congregations!" When the term "ethnic" means non-white, we assume that whiteness is the baseline, the standard, the measure of everything else. The baseline should be our common humanity in the eyes of God, not the culture we were raised in. When we look at it from that starting point, the call for economic justice in compensation of clergy serving non-White congregations becomes very clear.

We say we believe that God is healing and restoring the world, and that we are recipients of, and participants in that healing and restoration. This is our view of our calling. What is your calling in the context of this community call? Where do you fit in?