

January 15, 2012

“Called to Service”

Rev. Dr. Sharon Rhodes-Wickett

Called to Service

I Samuel 3: 1-20; John 1: 43-51
Epiphany 2, Year B

Sermon by Sharon Rhodes-Wickett
Claremont United Methodist Church
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The boy Samuel lay there wondering why Eli was calling to him in the middle of the night. Obedient, he went to Eli each time he heard the voice. But each time it wasn't Eli calling. Can't you just see the sleepy, tussled-haired adolescent boy stumbling through the dark wondering what the heck Eli wanted? Can't you just feel his exasperation at being awakened repeatedly? Do you know what it takes to even wake up a teen-aged boy?

This story gives us a glimpse of God at work, it gives us a glimpse of how God calls and how we discern the movement of God.

Samuel was an unimportant young kid doing service in the Temple. Samuel didn't know God, as the story goes. Samuel was confused about what was going on.

The first thing I would point out in the story is the unfolding of discernment. We watch and listen in this story to discover how long it will take Samuel to figure out that it is God. We have the advantage in the story. The narrator already filled us in on the mysterious voice. Samuel didn't have that advantage.

Samuel tried to sort it out while laying in the dark. How did he finally figure out whose voice kept bothering him in the dark of night? He went to another in the community. In this case it was his elder, the priest who had authority over him. Samuel went to Eli, thinking it was Eli calling him.

Eli realized that the sparse Word of God was trying to break through to Samuel. Eli was wise and generous and so he pointed Samuel in the right direction. Eli guided Samuel in how to talk with God. Eli told Samuel what to say and how to listen. Eli mentored Samuel in listening to God.

No matter if we are called to small or huge tasks for God, discernment is an important part of our response to God. We must trust that God's call fulfills God's desire for wholeness in the world. We trust that we are part of God's unfolding goodness. We are undergirded by the wisdom of the community of faith.

We learn from the story of Samuel that discernment is important, and that discernment happens in community. We need others for the discerning process. We need to be able to talk to one another about how we hear God, or how we wonder about God. We need community together to sort out our response to God.

And that's the second thing we learn from the story, that God's call and our response is not an individualistic act. It happens in community. The community sees and confirms the call. The community says "Yes! We see God's call in your life. We will strengthen you in fulfilling that call." Or the community says "we see something else. Have you tried exploring this?"

We often hear people say they aren't religious, but they are spiritual. What they usually mean is, I don't go in for the church as an organization, but on my own... I'm spiritual. We can understand why people draw away from flawed human institutions. But there is something important about community that is lost.

Father Allan Figueroa Deck, former executive director of the Loyola Institute for Spirituality in Orange¹ raised two important issues with this idea. One is that we Christians believe in a God who works through people, incarnationally, a God who touches us through another. Secondly, it points up the effects of rampant individualism.² If spirituality is seen as a solitary state to feel close to God and feel good about oneself, then how do we relate to a God who works through a community of people for the good of all creation?

Tomorrow we observe the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. What if his only concern was his private relationship with God and his own sense of worth and value?

What if his only focus was his success as an individual? Do you see the loss we would have experienced as a society? He was a powerful world-wide leader who was grounded in Christian community. In fact, he was grounded in a larger faith community.

Jim Lawson, as a short-term Methodist Missionary in India, studied with Ghandi and learned the methods and his passion for non-violent resistance. He brought that home and was recruited by King to train Civil Rights leaders and demonstrators in King's movement.

King recognized in Lawson a tremendous gift for making this movement different, for bringing the value of non-violence to it. For both King and Lawson, there was discernment of God's call and what and who God values.

So from Ghandi, to Lawson, to King, to the whole country, it happened in community. And then King and Lawson both mentored many others who have continued to bear witness to an inclusive non-violent society ever since.

They were mentored by others, and in turn, they mentored others.

How we commemorate his life on this holiday has evolved into a day of service. It is an appropriate way to honor a man who gave his life in service to God's greater vision of what could and can be. He knew that service to others is the only way God's vision can be fulfilled.

As King said:

"Everybody can be great, because anybody can serve.

You don't have to have a college degree to serve.

You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve.

You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve.

You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve.

You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve.

You only need a heart full of grace.

A soul generated by love."

Martin Luther King, Jr. discerned in community how God was calling him. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a vessel for God's hopes for humanity, for God's reign of justice, kindness, and peace.

We are fortunate to have in our community the Rev. Jim Dwyer who is the Western Jurisdiction Mission interpreter for the General Board of Global Ministries.

I have asked him to share ways you can be involved in service through our denomination... much like Jim Lawson did.

<Jim Dwyer's remarks>

¹ Father Allan Figueroa Deck is a member of the California Province of the Society of Jesus. He currently serves at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in Washington, DC as Executive Director of the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church.

² Los Angeles Times Saturday, January 15, 2000 "Less Focus on Church, but More on God." Section B2

There is one more thing about the story of Samuel and Eli to consider. That is: the message God gave to Samuel was a powerful and hard message, and one that would hurt his mentor Eli. The story suggests that Samuel didn't really want to tell Eli. The story also suggests that Eli in his gracious wisdom knew it was coming and was spiritually ready.

Eli was about to be told that he was phasing out of leadership. He was about to be left behind, not for anything he had done, but for the evil ways of his sons. Eli's sin was in not stopping his sons. He didn't do anything to change the situation. It must have been a heart-breaking moment for both Samuel and Eli to share that word of God between them.

God's call to Samuel was both an ending and a beginning. It was an ending to the era of Eli. It was a beginning to the era of Samuel. It was an ending of an old way, and a moving forward to new ways.

Hear the description from one commentator:

"...the message of this story is that corrupt institutions and oppressive practices need not endure. God opposes them. In the harsh word of judgment given to Samuel for Eli is the hopeful proclamation that God will not acquiesce to evil. Eli's calm and faithful acceptance of this harsh word is itself a model of faith in difficult circumstances.

"Eli is not the central cause of corruption in the order God will sweep away, but he is invested in that order. He, too, will pay a price in God's judgment on his sons. Historically the church, too, has found itself invested in corrupt orders it did not entirely create. Accepting God's judgment in times of social transformation and spiritual challenge involves us in the pain of Eli's complicity and calls us to reflect his trustful willingness to let God 'do what is good.' But this is also a story of new beginnings. To dwell on the judgment of Eli's house is to fail to rejoice in God's initiative to raise up new prophetic leadership. We cannot mourn so deeply what seems to be passing that we miss the signs of what God is bringing to birth."³

God calls people from the community for the good of the community. Those called are not just the ordained ones, or the paid ones, or the ones with titles.

Those called are the ones who claim their baptism, who listen and discern the voice of God amidst all the other voices that claim our time and energy. Those called are mentored by others in the community, and trust the nudge of God. The one called is willing to speak the hard truth God gives, and serves for the good of the community, that it will be aligned with God.

God called Eli and Samuel. God called Philip and Nathanael. God called Jesus. God calls you.

In the dark of your night, God whispers your name and calls you. In the depths of yourself, you may wonder what God would have you do. Say yes, talk to others, try it and find out. You will know. It's a matter of trust. It's a matter of faith.

If it is of God, it will not go away.

God created you, just the way you are. God gave you ability and capability. God calls you to use your gifts for the good of the community. God calls you to listen and to trust and to serve. .

Trust it and go the way of God.

³ The New Interpreter's Bible. page 994

Comments on MLK Day at CUMC 2012 — Sunday, January 15 — Jim Dwyer

In preparing my comments this morning I realized that the current pattern of linking days of service with the Martin Luther King holiday is something which developed during the quarter of a century when I was not living in the United States! As I thought through how to make the connection between this day and the opportunities offered through the General Board of Global Ministries, I began to reflect on my own attitude toward race relations and important figures in my life experience.

I remembered that my home town did not have any non-white population at all, except for a Hawaiian boy adopted by local parents and an apparently African-American boy whose origins no one bothered to explain. Later I learned “sunset laws” had earlier prohibited non-whites from either settling or staying overnight as guests within the town limits.

Our state capitol, Indianapolis, honored Black people with a large, but segregated high school. I was amazed to find that is now a “medical magnet” high school, instead of raucous basketball school. Crispus Attucks High School was named a run-away slave of African descent (or African and Native American descent), who was the first person to be shot by the British in the Boston Massacre of 1770 which marked the beginning of the American revolution. Ironically, Crispus Attucks’ own people were still waiting for the fruits of that independence when Dr. Martin Luther King came onto the national scene mid-20th century, nearly 200 years later.

Dr. King is perhaps best known for his “I have a dream” speech, which elaborates the vision found also in the spiritual “We Shall Overcome” — a hymn whose verses imagine boys and girls, men and women of all races walking hand in hand “someday”! We tend to idolize or idealize that elaboration and think that race relations are about “getting along together” — holding hands — overlooking the fact that racism has both an ugly and violent public face exhibited in the opposition to the civil rights movement, and also many faces of militarism, economic discrimination and bias, and exploitation shared with a whole series of “isms” which are habitually used explicitly, if subtly, to elevate one artificially identified group of people at the cost of degradation of another group of people (we used to use the term “denigration,” but the term itself is latently racist term).

As I reflected, I remembered encountering Dr. King and other leaders of the civil rights movement at the center of the Quadrennial Conference of the Methodist Student Movement in Lincoln, NE, in 1964. My first cousin from NC had come to that Conference, too, with an African American young woman as her roommate — an amazing thing for me, and no doubt a radical step which caused many to put dampers on M.S.M. in the years which followed.

In this student movement, we are then suddenly confronted with the mission of the church — namely to participate in God’s mission to restore all people and all creation to the glory God intended. This restoration requires of us to look beyond the comfortable confines of our own family, race, language and country to see God at work among all people everywhere, and to see the person of Christ present in every stranger we may meet as well as in every neighbor, family member or friend. We don’t have to take Christ to the nations. Christ is there waiting for us to take note!

The General Board of Global Ministries offers an incredible variety of opportunities to engage in God’s mission of restoring people to their proper relationship to God and to one another, and of restoring creation and creatures to their intended purpose of displaying the glory of God and the wonders of God’s handiwork.

- If you have fulfilled your life’s vocational goals and are looking for new meaning for retirement years, you may find yourself responding to a call to meet some obscure or obvious need somewhere in the U.S.A. or around the world. Perhaps you need just a bit of infrastructure to allow you to be an **Individual Volunteer** for anywhere from two months to two years.

- Or perhaps you don't want to go it alone, but you could imagine being part of a group endeavor along the lines of Habitat for Humanity home-building teams. Your Western Jurisdictional **Volunteer in Mission** teams or a team from another Jurisdiction may offer just the opportunity to build a needed building, provide help in a clinic or school, or some other project for just a few weeks of community building with people not like yourself who may or may not speak your language in this or another country.

- UMCOR — United Methodist Committee on Relief — is always in the process of training **disaster relief teams** for work after storms, floods and hurricanes wreak destruction on communities across the United States and occasionally overseas. UMCOR also organizes **medical teams** to go around the world to bring medical skills to bear where they may be needed most.

- If a long-term commitment does not scare you away, GBGM still sends **missionaries “from everywhere to everywhere.”** A century ago our church was mostly sending European-Americans to Africa, Asia or Latin America. Today, nearly half of GBGM's international missionaries are from “somewhere else” and serving “somewhere else”! But that means that half are still North Americans of many races heading around the world to offer not only skills they may have, but, most crucially, they offer their commitment to find out where God is already at work and who the people are whom God has already put to work, so that that work can be augmented by the presence of North American United Methodists and other Christians.

Assignments are of great variety. One person may be assigned to an international ecumenical agency in Geneva or elsewhere. Another may be helping develop theological education by distance learning or providing agricultural training in hands-on assistance. Another may find her task in the most primitive circumstances in rural regions where locally discriminated people — perhaps native peoples or linguistic minorities — are in need of education and tools for survival in the 21st century. Another may find himself standing with people who fight for human rights in their own country and who need international connections to protect themselves from oppressive regimes. While yet another may be learning a totally new approach to sustainable agriculture and environmental harmony in a setting far distant from U.S. agribusiness.

Long-term commitment these days, by the way, starts at three years, with options for renewal indefinitely. A century ago, it was a commitment till death or retirement age, whichever came first!

- Are you a young adult between 20 and 30 years of age. Then this is the moment to consider filing an application for one of the programs in **Young Adult Missionary Service** at GBGM. The deadline for the next round of programs is February 5, 2021 for Mission Intern and US2 programs. (Other programs with later deadlines are for Summer Interns and Peace with Justice Volunteers.) Mission Interns divide three years between a first assignment outside their home countries (the U.S.A. or another home country) and a second assignment within their own country. US2s, as the name implies, accept a two year assignment within the U.S.A.

The worship guide for Sunday, January 15 at Claremont United Methodist Church included a list of links (or URLs) to allow you to research online for further details about these and other programs, as well as the necessary links. I have added them to this printed summary of my comments:

Young Adult Missionary Services: “If you could change the world ...would you?”
(Global Justice Volunteers, Mission Interns, US-2s, Summer Interns)

<http://new.gbgm-umc.org/connections/youth/>

Categories of missionary service (see icons/links on the right sidebar of this page):

<http://new.gbgm-umc.org/about/us/mp/missionaries/>

“Deaconess or Home Missioner: Is this your calling?”

<http://new.gbgm-umc.org/about/us/mp/deaconess-homemissioner/calling/>

Global Ministries’ starting new churches in new places: Mission Initiatives

<http://new.gbgm-umc.org/work/initiatives/>

Opportunities for Volunteer Service — e.g., Health Care Volunteers, NOMADS, Ubuntu Explorers [UMW], UMVIM teams, UMCOR and UMVIM Disaster Response, Youth and Young Adults volunteers, Individual Volunteers, Primetimers, UMCOR Volunteer Opportunities, etc. (Links from here will take you to myriad opportunities for service!)

<http://new.gbgm-umc.org/connections/volunteers/>

Mission Volunteers — e.g. uTeach Volunteers, Global Justice Volunteers (Young Adults)

<http://new.gbgm-umc.org/about/us/mv/programs/>

Individual Volunteer Program

<http://new.gbgm-umc.org/about/us/mv/programs/individualvolunteer/>

UMW’s own Ubuntu Explorer Program — “I am human because you are human.”

<http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umw/programs/ubuntu/>