

A sermon delivered by
the Rev. David W. Fleenor

“Your Calling is Calling”

Church of the Transfiguration
1 East 29th Street, New York, NY
Sunday, January 18, 2008
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B

[1 Samuel 3:1-10\(11-20\)](#)

[1 Corinthians 6:11b-20](#)

[John 1:43-51](#)

[Psalm 63:1-8](#)

Introduction

Monster.com has a new slogan: “Your calling is calling.”¹ Of course, you know that Monster.com is a web site designed to help people find a job. But they seem to be moving in a direction to offer their customers more than just job search opportunities. They have now moved into the arena of vocational exploration. The term “vocation” comes from a Latin word meaning “to call.” Here is what Monster.com says, “At your core is something special which speaks to your passions and strengths and helps inform the shape of your career and your life. This is your calling.” Well, they get it half right.

Vocation

Vocational exploration has long been a part of the Christian life. The wisdom of our tradition teaches us that there are at least two important components when it comes to calling: the inward and outward focus. Monster.com only got the first one right. The inward focus can give rise to deep personal satisfaction. The second - the outward focus - is when your work serves the greater good. Frederick Buechner sums it up the best when he defines vocation as, “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.”² We must always strive to hold these two in balance.

Discernment

Monster.com wants to help its customer figure out what their calling is. In the Church, we call this discernment. Again, there are always two components: listening to the inner voice and the outer voice.

This is illustrated well in the Old Testament lesson we heard today. Samuel hears a voice, but is unsure what to make of it so he goes to a member of his community, Eli, and asks for help. The first few times Eli has very little to offer, but as he begins to listen also

¹ <http://www.monster.com/>

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 119 quoted in Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 16.

then the call becomes clear. The lesson says, “Eli perceived that the Lord was calling Samuel.” Discernment in the Church involves listening to your inner voice and listening to the outer voice of the community. When the two are in harmony then there is greater certainty to what God is saying.

Inward Focus

In his little book, *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer discusses his vision of vocation and centers the conversation on the “true self.”³ He says, “The true self of every human being is the seed of authentic vocation.” It is the true self that God created us to be. We spend a lot of energy trying to be something other than what God has created and called us to be, because it is so hard to believe that what we are is okay, maybe even good.

Do you know how Thomas Merton defined sin? He defined it as a refusal to be who you are created to be.⁴

What if it is just that simple? What if our vocation, in one sense, is simply to be who we are? If that is true, it leads to a very important question: Who are you?

A Quaker teacher, Douglas Steere, was fond of saying that the question “Who am I?” leads inevitably to the equally important question of “Whose am I?”⁵ How do you know who you are? Our identities are shaped by our relationships and affiliations with others. Who knows you better than anybody?

Parker Palmer tells a story about how his daughter and her newborn baby came to live with him for a while. As a grandparent he had a different perspective on this newborn than he had had as a young, twenty-something parent. He realized that this infant had not shown up as a blank slate, but rather as a beautifully and wonderfully made creature of God with her own personality and proclivities and sense of soul. He made it his hobby to jot down in a little notebook his observation about her so he could share them with her one day when she is in her early twenties. He plans to write her a letter that begins something like this:

“Here is a sketch of who you were from the earliest days in this world. It is not a definitive picture – only you can draw that. But it was sketched by a person who loves you very much. Perhaps these notes will help you do sooner something your grandfather did only later: remember who you were when you first arrived and reclaim the gift of true self.”⁶

Is there anyone in your life able to tell you who you were from the earliest days? Is there anyone you can think of who might have at least a mental sketch of you? If so, reconnect with that person as a way of discerning your true self – of answering the question, who am I?

³ Palmer, 9-36.

⁴ Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 12.

⁵ Palmer, 17.

⁶ Palmer, 12.

Baptism

We are fortunate to have a baptism today. For most, the call to baptism is the first call of God that is heard. God invites us to be united in the fellowship of the Trinity and in the community of God's Church. God invites us to know and be known, to love and be loved.

John Westerhoff says,

“Baptism makes the baptized person ‘a’ Christian; it tells us the truth about ourselves. But to become Christian, we need to spend the rest of our lives living into our baptism, becoming who we already are.”⁷

My favorite part of the Baptism is actually the chrismation. It is when the priest smears your forehead with oil and says, “You are marked as Christ’s own forever.” That moment in the baptism answers, for me, the question of “Whose am I?” I am Christ’s, and I am Christ’s forever. Which then leads to the question, “Who am I?” I am beloved of God and beloved of a community where I know others and they know me, where I love others and they love me. It is in this knowing and being known that I am able to discern what that inner voice is saying to me so that I can live out my vocation in this world and find deep satisfaction in this life.

The early Hassidic sage Rabbi Zusya once said, "When I reach the next world, God will not ask me, 'Why were you not Moses?' Instead, he will ask me, 'Why were you not Zusya?'"⁸

Outward Focus

In the midst of listening for true self, there is the opportunity for service to others. The outward focus of vocation is called ministry, and it is deeply connected to baptism. All the baptized are called to participate in the ministry of the church. Now, when most people hear the word “ministry” they think of becoming a deacon, priest, or bishop, but that is only one small aspect of ministry called ordained ministry. You may not realize it, but you – the laity – are the most important arm of ministry in the church. The ordained ministry is focused on supporting you for your ministry.

It helps if you think of it like an upside down triangle: the ordained are on the bottom, at the tip; and the laity are at the top, in the wider space. Our ministry is to equip, enable, and support you for your ministries.

Right now the main focus of the Episcopal Church is on the *Millennium Development Goals*, which include issues of global poverty, universal education, gender equality, child and maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, and environmental sustainability.⁹

⁷ John Westerhoff, *Living Faithfully as a Prayer Book People* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2004), 61

⁸ Martin Buber, *Tales of Hasidism: The Early Masters* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 251 quoted in Palmer, 11.

⁹ http://www.episcopalchurch.org/3654_77150_ENG_HTM.htm

When you hear those issues listed does any one or two make your heart leap? Do you feel a fire in your belly about any of those? If so, that might be a starting place for you to begin discerning your call to ministry? Those are big issues, though, that may not speak to everyone, so what about your ministry here in this church? I always like to think of those unseen ministries that serve as the backbone of any community. One of the first ministries I heard a call to was to maintain the weekly bulletin in the church I attended when I was 18-years-old. This was a small church with only one full-time employee, which was the pastor. The rest of the church was kept afloat by lay ministers who volunteered their time for everything. Making the bulletin each week was not a glamorous job, but it meant a lot to me and to the parish. It was God's call for me at that time and place.

Here at the little church I can think of similar ministries. One that immediately comes to mind is the ministry of hospitality after the 11am service each week where many of you use your gifts to purchase or make food for all of us to enjoy. That may sound like a trivial ministry, especially in the face of the MDGs. However, that ministry facilitates a very important aspect of our life together: community. As we stand around in the back of the church with a donut in one hand and coffee in the other we have the opportunity to know and the known. We engage in relationship to varying degrees and stay connected during that time. Ideas are born and facilitated that impact this church and community.

There are other ministries, as well, including gardening, folding the bulletins, polishing the brass and silver, and on and on. All of these are ministries of the baptized and they are connected to that sense of true self.

Conclusion

We began with one slogan: "Your calling is calling." Let me end with another: since 2004 the United Church of Christ's slogan has been, "God is still speaking,"¹⁰

I think both Monster.com and the UCC are correct. So I will leave you with this question: what call from God might you be hearing today?

¹⁰ <http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking/>