

**CALLED; 1 SAMUEL 3:1-10; JOHN 1:43-51; OFFICER ORDINATION; JANUARY 11, 2015; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

In the Bible, humans often try to put God in some small, manageable box; we enforce the letter, not the spirit of the law and wrap ourselves in pious, public ritual; but God is forever trying to humanize us, make us real by not staying confined to our narrow definitions and small expectations for the holy. The result is God is often not where we expect to find him, but in the last place we'd choose to look.

That's the theme today. The boy Samuel, valet for the old priest Eli, ends up being the one God calls – not the seasoned, wise, faithful clergyman; and the story from John features skeptical, naysayer Nathaniel, as the one Jesus picks to be his new disciple, then there's Jesus himself – a no-account carpenter from a no-where town – the very savior of the human race.

It tends to up-end our notion of how things ought to work; the one with seniority ought to get the favored, revered position or the white, educated, middle class male; or the one with academic titles and honors; or the one who has financial pull and political power.

Yet, the Bible sends the clear message again and again that this is not how God works. Starting with Abraham and Sarah, a young, naïve couple all the way through to St. Paul – a persecutor of God's people.

Moses, Jacob, Ruth, Rachel, the prophets every one, David the boy who would be king; the disciples of course – rarely was ever a group of such misfits assembled for any purpose let alone to launch a movement that would outsmart, overwhelm and outlast the greatest empire on earth.

So if you are here today, trying to remain anonymous, unnoticed, inconspicuous and then quietly go home to your familiar routine, you may be just the candidate God is looking for to lead a revival or change someone's life.

Rarely does any reason or excuse not to be selected or called get in the way. Abraham and Sarah were just kids when the future of humanity was placed in their laps; Sarah was old and barren when she was told she would become matriarch of a great nation; Moses had a bad stutter but was the one God pegged as lead negotiator with Pharaoh; David, a shepherd boy who played the tin whistle was called to fight – winner take all – mountain man Goliath.

Waffle-man Peter, the solid-as-a-rock foundation of the church? Really? Mistress of the night Mary Magdalene invited to the inner circle of Jesus friends. What was he thinking!

Raise up the lowly, topple the mighty. That's how God works and seems to take pleasure and delight in doing so. These are good readings for this day in particular because we are ordaining and installing four new Deacons and two new Elders. I am not suggesting that we have looked in the down and out places to find these wonderful people to serve the church. In fact, we have a very careful selection process to make sure we have the best candidates possible.

What I am saying is when it comes to the church, when it comes to making this place run the way it's supposed to, when it comes to tackling the most important things God wants us to tackle – we are wise to remember that God works in ways the world considers foolish; God brings about results with unexpected and unorthodox representatives and agents; and God is not above using procedures the Harvard Business School or Good Housekeeping Approval Committee would frown upon.

And therein is our liberation. If we don't have to have an MBA or be among the philanthropic class or have achieved some award-winning recognition in order to have the Holy Spirit select us and work through us, then we can stop using the excuses we make to God or more likely to ourselves that the Nominating Committee or chairperson of the taskforce should find someone else.

Instead of thinking we need to know more about the Bible or be a better church member or have some position of authority here, we can consider the idea that God has already given us what we need to be called to some important ministry. The barriers have been removed. We might be called at any minute to do any of the things Jesus did: heal the sick, feed the hungry, visit those in some prison of loneliness. We are surrounded by need right in this congregation before we even set foot in the world.

Bill Blakeslee, a former stalwart member of our choir but officially a member of Trinity Episcopal Church because his father was an Episcopal priest and Bill has a warm place in his heart for the Episcopal church, Bill liked to make the distinction between Christianity and what he called "Churchianity."

Christianity is the practice of Christ-like principles in day-to-day living; Churchianity is a life that makes everything religious, deified, holier than thou but ends up being of little use or relevance to the world. Churchianity thinks that to be Christian we need to be squeaky clean and morally perfect; Churchianity in practice looks a lot like the Pharisees who prayed aloud in public places and wore sack-cloth and ashes on holy days but when the world wasn't looking kicked the dog and cheated on their taxes.

What I am saying today is that when all is said and done what matters is whether our hearts are in it or not; whether we are willing to admit that we're sick and tired of being sick and tired or that we are bored to tears with the practice of a religion that is hollow and empty.

Rather are we willing to consider taking a risk turning our lives over to an unpredictable higher power; a God who has the best interests of humanity at heart especially those overlooked by our limited justice and relief for those who suffer.

All God wants and needs to make of his church and people, what he wants to make of us is the *real* you and the *real* me – not the puffed up versions, or the Facebook-everything-in-my-life-is-fun version.

But the version that bears even a small longing to have impact and bring hope. We don't need more committees, we need more people willing to take the plunge into the future of a ministry that might not exist yet, or one that does but needs a reality check.

I am talking about more than the pursuit of happiness. I am talking the experience of satisfaction, connection, and being part of something bigger than ourselves that may not be finished in our lifetime but will meet our deepest need for satisfaction when we close our eyes at night and for the last time on this earth.

I am talking about what David Brooks referred to as a “meaningful life” in a column this past week: “Happiness is about enjoying the present; meaning is about dedicating oneself to the future. Happiness is about receiving; meaningfulness is about giving. Happiness is about upbeat moods and nice experiences. People leading meaningful lives experience a deeper sense of satisfaction.”

You see while we are installing new Elders and Deacons today who surely need your prayers and support, this ministry, this church, their leadership won't get us to where we need to go unless they can count on you and me being willing to go “all in” as the current culture likes to say. Sure, some of us are here to heal or reflect or take a time out from some difficult experience; and some of us are here faithfully because being in church and worshipping God make us feel better as the week begins. And that's fine.

But what I am saying today as we witness God call a mere shepherd boy to become a great leader of Israel and Jesus call a prickly, skeptic and sourpuss to become a person of compassion and service and as we ordain and install women and men out of our midst who are putting themselves on the line today, what I am saying is that there is a greater calling for *all of us*, beyond our comfort zone of routine or even rut.

When we look at the people God calls and uses in the Bible not only are we left with no excuses to respond in some way to the plethora of needs around us but we ought to take heart. If God can change the world with a pimply boy or woman of ill repute or fundamentalist and persecutor imagine what God can do with us!

So the assignment today is to listen, God is calling, you may hear it the first time and think it's for someone else, you may hear it a second time and conclude you're the wrong person, but if the voice persists even in a whisper – it's you God and this church are waiting for to say ‘Here am I.’ Amen.