

A Listening, Following Community

1 Samuel 3:1-10 *And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."*

John 1:35-51 *When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?"*

Recently I was reminded of the different way we in the Church of the Covenant go about trying to be Christ's church. I did not say "better." We must never confuse being "different" with thinking ourselves "better." The vision of Christian life and ministry that has been cultivated here for over 50 years is very challenging, and because of that, it can be deeply rewarding for those who feel called to it. It is about persons seeing themselves as called by God to an inward journey of personal spiritual deepening and growth, and to an outward journey of touching the needs of the world through the exercising of the gifts God gives us to share. It is a life of following Jesus, learning from him what it means to be a true human being, and becoming servants of life. It is also about working with all of this in a community of persons called to be together, live together, and work together in the love of God as we know it in Christ. Simply put, we envision our life and try to live it as a community of commitment to following Jesus. And we are always learning what that means and how challenging it is. We don't have the answers; we are always living into the answers.

Most people are used to the church as a religious organization to which you give some time and some money, in return expecting certain religious or spiritual benefits and services. Those who come to the Church of the Covenant with such a consumerist expectation will sooner or later be disappointed and disillusioned. What we try to work with here is taking responsibility for our own relationship with God through Jesus Christ, our own spiritual life. To me that means being aware of and attending to our relationship with God, listening to God's call within the uniqueness of our own lives, and responding to that call.

The story of the call of Samuel is only one of many stories in Hebrew and Christian scriptures that can help us reflect on God's call in our lives and on ourselves as called people. It begins with the curious, almost ominous statement that the word of God was rare in those days and visions were not widespread. It causes you to think, doesn't it? Is that because God was not speaking or stirring up visions in people's hearts and minds? Could it be that there are times when God is silent, when the life-giving, vision-inspiring Word (*dhabar*) is inactive or faint? By the way, the word "Word" here, as in the "Word of God," is not so much verbal, even less the printed word. It is the divine energy or truth that gives, inspires, and directs life itself. The UCC's slogan is "God Is Still Speaking." Well, maybe sometimes God goes silent, and for us that means a time of searching our own hearts and lives, of waiting, being watchful, and NOT rushing around doing what WE think God wants, NOT always talking about what WE think God is saying. There are plenty of instances in scripture where people speak a word that is not from God or take action that is not divinely "called for."

Or maybe God IS speaking and visions are always there to be grasped, but we are not listening or opening up mind and spirit enough to see things in new ways. We become so busy, so occupied with what we think is important that we don't listen, we don't quiet our lives and hearts and minds enough to hear another word, to catch a new vision. Sometimes we are so full of our own ideas, including religious or spiritual "knowledge," that we don't have room for anything God might be trying to say to us. In the spiritual life there is a very important idea, or practice, really—emptiness. We cannot be receptive to God's speaking, to God's movements in our lives if we are full of our own ideas, opinions, programs, and projects. In order to receive, we need to be empty. In order to hear, we need to be silent.

As Community and Covenant Members we commit ourselves to regular practice of prayer, in the fullest sense of the word. Prayer is not only lifting our concerns and needs to God, but emptying ourselves, quieting our hearts and minds so that we are ready to listen. Whether God has gone silent or we are simply not listening, our spiritual work is the same—to become persons and a community that listens, that is ready to hear. You remember the old philosophical problem—If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? Well, in this community we try to live with the reality that there may be many things that are needed, both in our community and in the world around us, but unless someone is called to it, it will not happen. So we wait and pray for a called person to embody that ministry, that vision, that response to some need. The call may well be there, but it needs someone to hear it and embody it.

Eli is the priest at Shiloh. He is old and his eyesight is about gone. The boy Samuel is a kind of apprentice to Eli. Eli is lying down in his room. Samuel is lying down in the temple itself, near the Ark of the Covenant. Samuel hears a voice calling his name, and he rushes into Eli's room thinking it was Eli calling him. Eli sends him back to bed. The third time this happens, Eli realizes that something special is going on. God is speaking to the boy. God's silence is about to be broken. Go back and lie down, says Eli. If the voice comes again, answer--Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening. The voice does call again, and Samuel has his first experience of God's call in his life.

The text says that Samuel did not yet know the Lord and the word of God had not yet been revealed to him. This, too, gives us something to reflect on. We can do all kinds of religious things without making contact, as it were, with our own relationship with the living God. We can hang around sacred places all day long and still not know the sacred dimension of our own hearts. We can be a very busy and active, even "successful" religious organization without really listening for God's voice, seeking God's call in our own lives. I think this is why a great many people simply don't find religion very appealing these days, in spite of the mega church phenomenon. The whole idea of doing religious things and building up yet another institution that needs constant maintenance does not make sense if you are looking for something deeper, something that roots and grounds your own life in the sacred. I know this sounds heretical, but Jesus did not set out to found a new religion or to establish a church organization as we know it. He was calling together a small group of followers to give themselves to God and each other in love, and to serve the world with words, actions, and a life together that communicated good news—forgiveness, justice, compassion, peace, love, servanthood.

Notice how Eli, the old priest, does not interject himself between Samuel and God. His spiritual wisdom, nurtured by years of faithfulness, helps him to perceive that God is calling the boy. He recognizes and honors Samuel's own relationship with God. This is how we need to relate to children and young people when it comes to the spiritual life, and life in general. We need to recognize that they belong first of all to God and not to us. They are not our "property," as it were, to control, shape, mold, or any of those other words we use to cover our desires to manipulate them. When it comes to the spiritual life, our role as older persons with regard to younger people is to be sensitive to their own relationship with God and to encourage them in that direction, reminding them from time to time that they are indeed "precious in God's sight."

This is what we are to do with one another, as well. In the Church of the Covenant we talk about accountability. It is one of our core words, the meaning of which we are always discovering and understanding more fully. A part of accountability is relating to one another in ways that honor the other person in his or her own relationship with God. This means we show deep respect, even when we have disagreements or misunderstandings. Accountability also means that we remind each other of the commitments we have made to spiritual practices that sustain and deepen our relationship with God. We don't tell each other what to do, but we try to say to one another in various ways, as Eli said to Samuel--Go back and listen to God, and be ready to serve.

This is a point of our life that is most frequently misunderstood. In the Church of the Covenant community, no one is going to tell you what to do. Sometimes we get caught up in passion for our own particular calling and mission and think that everyone else should make it their priority. However, for the most part, we recognize that if we come into this community and desire to make the commitment to stay, it means taking responsibility for our own relationship with God in all its inward and outward dimensions. And it means encouraging and reminding each other to do so. Those who come into the community looking for someone to tell them what to do will be disappointed. Those who come into the community looking to tell the community what it should do and others what they should do will not be happy or stay very long. It is about each of us working with our own relationship with God and God's call in our lives. That is what creates the diversity of gifts and ministries through which God is able to bring new life to the world.

In John's gospel, John the Baptist is standing by the road with some of his disciples. Jesus walks by and John tells his disciples--Look, there is the Lamb of God. That is the one I've been talking about, the one who is greater than I, who will immerse your life in God's spirit. So, two disciples start walking behind Jesus. Notice that in this case Jesus doesn't call them; they just start walking behind him. Maybe they are just curious, maybe wanting to test the waters, so to speak. Maybe they want to hang back at a safe distance, not get too involved, at least yet. Jesus turns around and asks them--What are you looking for? I don't think this is a simple question about their interest in becoming his disciples. I think it is the most profound of life's questions. What are you looking for? What is it that you most want? What is your deepest desire and love? What do you most want to give to the world, to life? That's what the life of faith is about. That's where the call of God emerges. It's serious business because it has to do with who we really are as human beings, how we are made, and what we can do with our lives. It is the question Jesus asks us, and it is the question that we work with when we make a commitment to our own spiritual life, to our own relationship with God. No one can answer that for us.

And we cannot answer it for someone else. We each seek it for ourselves, and yet we are called into a community that itself is called to support and nourish that journey.