

## **ONE THING I KNOW . . .**

**Lent 4 3/30/14**

**Jn 9:1-41    I Sam 16:1-13    Ps 23    Eph 5:8-14**

**Gualala**

I suppose we could call this homily a twofer . . . in that it is divided between two of our texts . . . the first part looking at the call to Samuel . . . and the second considering the blind man made whole by Jesus. Normally a twofer, in Broadway language, means that one gets twice the value for one's money . . . equally, I suppose, it could be interpreted as it's worth only half as much . . . however I'd rather not pursue this line of reasoning any further . . .

Most of us well remember the story of Samuel's call while he was serving Eli, who, though far along in years, still had a deep sense of the Presence of God surrounding him in the temple. The Sunday School dramas of my childhood were well-played out . . . and we argued about who would get to be Samuel and who would get to be Eli . . . no one dared volunteer to be God. That part was for the teacher.

Sleeping, Samuel heard his name called out, ran to Eli, who had said nothing, exhorted Samuel to get back to sleep. The second time this happened, Eli perceived that there was something truly holy going on . . . and, instead of simply telling him to go to sleep, Eli told Samuel, "If this happens again, respond with 'Speak, Lord, for thy servant hears'" (I Sam 3). Eli's counsel was, in effect: "Respond with your heart . . . and your mind will catch up in time . . ."

Now that Samuel had grown into manhood, he once again is called to a far more dangerous task . . . to anoint the young David and not the fearsome Saul . . . which, to do, may well jeopardize Samuel's life. It was Samuel who had anointed Saul as Israel's first king (I Sam 9:15ff), and now it was Samuel's call to rescind that appointment.

Nevertheless, Samuel remained faithful to his appointed task . . . for long after Saul had demonstrated the deficiencies of a human political leader . . . all politicians are deficient simply because they are human . . . Samuel continued to grieve for Saul and for Israel. After we learn of Saul's rise and fall, Samuel is presented as a gracious leader . . . one who does not gloat over the sins of the king . . . rather Samuel grieves over the loss of possibility and potential. Lament, humility and patience are marks of the true leader, the true person of God.

Nevertheless the call by God was not to be ignored. Such was Samuel's faith and conviction that he performed a ritual of consecration to anoint the successor to Saul, who had been rejected by the Lord for a second term. It almost sounds like the smoke-filled back rooms of yesteryear's presidential nomination system. So Samuel went through the seven sons of Jesse in order of birth, with each one considered according to various merits . . . and each one rejected by the Lord. At which point, unlike today, Samuel seemed to have run out of candidates. However the ace in the hole was the youngest . . . the shepherd David . . . who became The Anointed One . . . and, through his skills in warfare and politics, and in spite of his peccadillos, King David pushed the boundaries of Israel to their farthest limits.

This call process seems to be relatively straightforward . . . God speaks, the person hears, the called-one does. However there may be a lot of back-stories in Scripture that we never read . . . we have only what we have. The possibilities are endless for surprised and sacrilegious responses that might have been uttered by God's very-human, very unholy, people, and which never made it into holy writ. Consider . . . Lot's wife: "Phooey. We already have more salt than we can use." Moses: "That's a really high mountain for an old man to climb." Zaccheus to Amos: "Thanks for planting that sycamore tree." Mary: "Am I on Candid Camera?" Saul: "You made your point. Now can I see?"

Unholy words and not-so-holy thoughts notwithstanding, there can be a lot of confusion and uncertainty for we who listen intently to, and for, the call of God . . . we can easily end up mis-informed in both serious and tragic ways . . . no matter that we indeed are serious about following God's call to each one of us.

In the mid-50s, Horace, a pious and serious bachelor, sold his farm in southern Minnesota to enter Augustana Theological Seminary. He had seen a vision and was compelled to follow it. Horace interned in our home church in St. Paul, and although the entire congregation was groaning for him, hoping for him and pulling for him, it became apparent that Horace and the Parish Ministry were really not a good match. Some three years later I talked with one of my Profs at Seminary, Dr. Arnold, whose responsibility it was to counsel Horace out of further seminary studies. This was no simple task, since Horace knew he had seen the vision and heard the call. While this might sound like a preacher's sick joke . . . it isn't. I personally knew all the players in this drama and I was on hand to see how it all played out. The vision Horace saw was simply a set of clouds that appeared to read "P C", which Horace interpreted as "Preach Christ." Dr. Arnold could not argue with Horace's good intentions . . . and neither could he overlook the fact that Horace could not stumble through a simple reading of the Gospel without the entire congregation sweating it out with him. Much less make it through his sermon. Finally Dr. Arnold mused that "P C" just might have meant "Plow Corn", which Horace could do better than any of the farmers in his entire county. Following Dr. Arnold's advice, Horace returned to that which he knew how to do best . . . and there he fulfilled his true call, plowing corn to the glory of God.

While a call may well be clear . . . the interpretation of its meaning ought to remain suspect. And wise is the person on the receiving end, to test out the interpretation before jumping in with both feet. Abraham, father in our faith, argued with God at great length. Joshua set out twelve stones, which were simply stones until an interpretation was placed upon them (Joshua 4). Interpretations of the Book of Revelation seem to be forever up for grabs . . . and the controversy about The Six Days of Creation will likely never end.

This being the case . . . how might we go about interpreting the call and the will of God? There's no cookbook answer . . . and if one is absolutely certain, that certainty might well be an indication of wrong-headedness equally as well as an indication of accuracy.

One definition of a call is, “Seeing a need, and having the means to fulfil that need.” Even within this, there remains the fact that God has given us brains as well as hearts . . . and one method to determine whether or not one is called to whatever, is to wait as long as possible on that call . . . then make a tentative decision in either direction . . . and dare to believe that God will either affirm the decision or deny it.

In 1973, when we believed that our ministry in Inglewood had come to an end, I was absolutely certain that our next call would be to Council Bluffs, Iowa. For two months after the interview I was making grand and glorious plans to save the entire city . . . and then we received a call to come to Davis. On the evening before the Davis call expired, I called Council Bluffs to let them know I was ready to come . . . at which point the president of the council stated simply, “Oh . . . our new pastor has been here for two months.” That was one more painful wake-up call for me to not arrogantly presume on the will of God . . . and it was about five years after we had been at Davis that I finally, and clearly, saw that I had planned on Council Bluffs for all the wrong reasons.

Certainty, at best, can well be an enemy of faith. And arrogance forever destroys grace and humility.

A call is a call is a call. It is the interpretation of the call which forever must remain suspect. And until an interpretation is made, in faith and with a mind open to being either informed or mis-informed, the call must always be recognized as ambiguous. “P C”, apparently, was clearly “P C”. And, Plowing Corn was the most effective, and faith-filled way, for Horace to Preach Christ.

Every task we do ought to be seen as a call from God to serve God in that specific way . . . from bar-tending to ditch-digging . . . from quilting to changing diapers . . . from serving coffee to washing the cups . . . from teaching to clerking to banking to entrepreneurship to street-sweeping . . . or, as with Samuel, simply helping others recognize how it is that God is using them . . . and, at times, guiding people back into the vocation where they can be the most effective. In whatever way we serve, when we do it to the Glory of God, we are, indeed, answering God’s call to each of us to be God’s witnesses to the end of the earth.

Daily, then, we are called to proclaim the Gospel when and where we are on that given day. Only when necessary, it has been said, ought we use words.

We now shift in this twofer to our text from John. Not only is this one of the longer readings during the Church Year . . . it is so charged with meaning that it would take a whole series of homilies to unpack its treasures. So we focus on but one section . . .

It begins with the typical straight-forward manner of a situation which leads to questions of interpretation. Is the man blind because of his own sin or the sin of his parents? While human sin is, indeed, the genesis of a lot of ills, Sin, in this case, got blamed for a blindness for which Sin was not responsible . . . and Jesus shifted the focus to where it belonged . . . look for the works of God to be made manifest in this, and in every, situation. Wrong questions will all ways lead to wrong answers.

However, the human mind is often not content to simply revel in the works of God . . . to appreciate them . . . to stand in awe of those works . . . the mind forever seeks to attempt to explain them . . . nor ought all works be explained . . . nor can the works of God ever be explained.

Enter the Pharisees, that group of folks who get whipped a lot more than they deserve . . . nevertheless in this instance they earned what they got. Trying to ensnare Jesus by way of the hapless beggar, the Pharisees had a single agenda: they were determined to get the answer they needed to trap Jesus. So they kept pushing the man to label his benefactor a sinner . . . and to tell them how he had come to see.

The man, perhaps fearful . . . perhaps frustrated . . . perhaps confused . . . gave the straightforward answer which was the only answer he could honestly give: "I have no idea how . . . nevertheless, one thing I know . . . whereas once I was blind, now I see" (Jn 9:25).

Explain love and love is lost. Explain grace and grace disappears. Explain faith and there is no faith. Explain the Resurrection and we'll push Jesus back into the tomb and roll the stone over the entrance. Explain God and God is diminished . . . re-created in our image, rather than we being created in the Imago Dei . . . the image of God.

Is it arrogance, or just plain stubbornness, that leads us to forever attempt to define the undefinable . . . to unscrew the inscrutable . . .

The poem by John Godfrey Saxe is a classic . . .

It was six men of Indostan/In learning much inclined,  
Who went to see the Elephant/Though all of them were blind;  
That each by observation/Might satisfy the mind.  
    The First approached the Elephant/And happening to fall  
    Against his broad and sturdy side/At once began to bawl:  
    "God bless me – but the Elephant/Is very like a wall!"  
The Second, feeling of the tusk/Cried: "Ho – what have we here  
So very round and smooth and sharp?/To me, 'tis mighty clear  
This wonder of an Elephant/Is very like a spear!"  
    The Third approached the animal,/And happening to take

The squirming trunk within his hands/Thus boldly up and spake:  
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant/Is very like a snake!”

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The Fourth reached out his eager hand/And felt about the knee.  
“What most this wondrous beast is like/Is mighty plain,” quoth he;  
“Tis clear enough, the Elephant/Is very like a tree!”  
The Fifth, who chanced upon the ear/Said “E’en the blindest man  
Can tell what this resembles most;/Deny the fact who can,  
This marvel of an Elephant/Is very like a fan!”  
The Sixth no sooner had begun/About the beast to grope,  
Then, seizing on the swinging tail/That fell within his scope,  
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant/Is very like a rope!”  
And so these men of Indostan/Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion/Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right/And all were in the wrong!  
So, oft in theologic wars/The disputants, I do ween  
Rail on in utter ignorance/Of what each other mean,  
And prate about an Elephant/Not one of them has seen!

Often have I stated that, to put the letters G O D at the top of a blank piece of paper is one thing. To add anything more on that same paper is pure speculation. Nevertheless human nature being the bold and arrogant animal that it is, for centuries humans have done their best to add to the paper, each convinced that each is in the right, and not one of them has ever seen God. It can be said about theologians and preachers alike, that, in more ways than one, we likely fear to admit that we all are the blind leading the blind. Humbly at times . . . arrogantly at others . . . and, at best  
. . . partly in the right and all ways in the wrong.

Each of us . . . partially sighted . . . partially blind . . . gropes in the darkness towards the light . . . the light of God which beckons us and which calls us . . . to kneel . . . to adore . . . and to see.

“God is Spirit,” we read last Sunday, “and they who worship him must worship him in Spirit and in Truth” (Jn 4:24).

At the least . . . and, perhaps . . . at the most . . . what we can do in our life of faith and faithing . . . in our life of witnessing to the works of God . . . in our answering God’s call to each of us . . . is to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).

At the least . . . and, perhaps . . . at the most . . . we are called to explain nothing . . . explanations are for the scientist to make . . . any explanation will only diminish . . . rather we are called to fall down in worship . . . to witness in Spirit and in Truth . . . from the experience of the heart . . . for, knowing little of how . . . the one thing we do know is that, where once we were blind, now we see.

And, so . . . touched by the hand of the Savior, we walk confidently at times . . . stumbling at others

. . . always with gratitude for the miracle . . . humbled by that miracle of grace . . . with confident assurance that God in the Christ is always there to help us to see.

. . . Amen