

“Called”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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Imagine that this day holds the totality of your life. You were born at sunrise. By mid-morning, you were a child, playful and curious. By noon you had attained young adulthood, right there at a crossroads that held so many choices it was dizzying (if you were fortunate to have food in your tummy and a roof over your head, and education at your disposal). By dinnertime, say 6 pm, you had cast some lots – perhaps married once, perhaps married twice, perhaps partnered, perhaps had some children, some jobs, maybe even a career. Your sense of community was more or less established. You may be a member of various associations, a church even, perhaps with some leadership responsibilities. Most likely, those questions that wracked your brain in young adulthood were surfacing again: what am I doing with my life? What am I doing with my work? What is my purpose here? Am I half-way through it all? As the clock ticks, a sense of desperation invades. This will not last forever, not that I know of at least. Midnight rings as you mark your 60th trip around the sun. You’re feted with cards with anxious quips about growing older. The clock ticks. You want more time with family and friends. You’re thinking about mending some relationship rifts, or at least understanding them better. You’re becoming conscious of looking in a rearview mirror as much as the road in front of you. It’s past midnight. You dare to dream, and your dreams deliver hints of what’s important. Maybe you wake up, maybe you don’t, as the sun rises on a vintage you. What did your dreams reveal? Where have you been? What difference did you make? What did your life call you to be, and how, year by year, day by day, did you respond?

As solitary souls and as a community of soul, to what are we called as the clock ticks on the life of this parish? How do we discern our calling? How do we heed it? And why does it matter anyway?

I’m reminded of the story of the young boy, Samuel as told in the Old Testament’s First Book of Samuel, a book that recounts the birth and blossoming of this person commonly called prophet, who lived his life in the 11th century BCE. But before sharing this story, let me back up and recall some personal context. For me, the story of young Samuel came to life through the voice of my Mother. I was tucked into my bed with the lights dimmed so that my eyes wouldn’t be harmed during my early bout with the measles – one of those illnesses that most of our children will never know, thanks to the vaccine. But when I was little, it was one of those illnesses that was common for children, and I was lucky enough to have a Mom who read to me during the tedium of not being able to turn on my lights and read for myself. I have no idea how she came upon such a hefty tome of Bible stories, but a big black book called *Happy Half Hours with the Bible* held the riches of my first biblical musings. Besides it came with full-color illustrations of figures who magically looked like my family, albeit some with beards. The edition was multi-culturally clueless but rich with stories that were anything but clueless, like the story of Samuel.

I learned that Samuel was a long wanted child. For many years, his mother Hannah hadn’t been able to have a child. My Mom didn’t mention that she was one of two wives, and the other one had lots of children. *Happy Half Hours with the Bible* probably edited that out. But

what was left was enough. In the presence of a priest named Eli, Hannah had made a deal with God that if she had a baby – a son, she specified – she would give her child to God. Her husband, Elkanah, loved her dearly and wanted to have a child with her almost as much as Hannah wanted to bear a child; so he went along with the deal being struck. Sure enough, Hannah became pregnant, gave birth to a son, and called him Samuel, meaning he had been asked of the Lord. Hannah remained true to her word, and at an early age, perhaps three or four, the young boy Samuel was sent off to serve God in the house of the priest, Eli.

As I return to this passage, I'm intrigued to read that "...the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision." (I Samuel 3:1b) In other words, there weren't too many direct conversations between God and humankind, such as that between Abraham and God, when Abraham was asked to sacrifice Isaac, or between Moses and God, when Moses encountered God in the burning bush and asked about the identity behind the voice that spoke. What transpired in the story of Samuel was out of the ordinary for this time and circumstance.

Eli was quickly losing his eyesight, and he lay down in his bed with what was called the lamp of God still on. (Did I ask as a child whether Eli was defiantly reading with a bright light when HE had the measles?) Samuel was in the temple area, where the ark of God was kept, when he heard a voice call, "Samuel, Samuel!" He replied simply "Here I am," and ran into Eli repeating again, "Here I am, for you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call; lie down again." So Samuel went back to bed. Once again the voice came, "Samuel, Samuel!" Once again, Samuel ran to Eli, and Eli told him to go back to bed; he hadn't called him. Of course the call came a third time, but this time, when Samuel went to Eli, Eli knew that the voice calling the child was that of the Lord. And Eli said to Samuel, "'Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for thy servant hears.'" Samuel did so. And God spoke to Samuel a warning of what he was about to do to the House of Eli. Samuel decided to share God's words with Eli, and the story continues.

For me, what was so intriguing was two-fold: 1) that Hannah honored her promise to give up her child to the service of God by sending him off to live in the house of the priest; and 2) that God called Samuel. How, I wondered, could any mother give her child up, even to God? And how was it that a small child was called by God?

Consider the notion of call, pure and simple. By the very reality that each of us is here in this world, we are called. By the amazing grace that each of us has been born, we are called into this world. We come with a polyglot of genetically wrought features, quirks, and inclinations and a not completely blank slate that rapidly fills with what we identify as socialization. Some of us learn quickly what pleases our parents and what doesn't, how we rise or fall in a culture friendly or hostile to who we are and what we look like, and what we must do to "succeed" in the circumstances of our living. Choice is relative. I believe, though, that we are each privy to the same kind of call that young Samuel received. We are each entrusted at some point to the grace of a larger world, like Samuel was entrusted to the grace of the priest Eli in the service of his Creator. And we each must discern that still small voice that speaks our name from our interior depths and bids us to do and be who we have always been.

As my friend and colleague, Rosemary Chinnici, proclaimed in her ordination sermon for one of her former students at Starr King School of Theology:

"Every call lies at the intersection of the past we have inherited and the future we are creating." It is intrinsic to who we have been and prophetic of who we are

becoming. It resonates for each of us in our solitude and all of us in our community. I am called. You are called. We are called.

To “do church” is to heed a call that, in our Unitarian Universalist tradition, bids us to unearth the distinctiveness of who we each are, to live it, and to do so in the affirming circle of this faith community. The third of our shared principles suggests that we accept one another and encourage spiritual growth in our congregations. Spiritual growth is to heed the inner voice that bids us to be who we are, to recognize that it is not an external voice, but rises from the deepest layers of our own spirit.

Vocare is Latin for the verb, “to call.” From it derives the term vocation. Vocation, writes Quaker author and teacher Parker Palmer, is a melding of self and service, a fusion of inner depths with outer needs. At its deepest level, vocation is an epiphany that goes something like: “This is something I can’t not do, for reasons I’m unable to explain to anyone else and don’t fully understand myself but that are nonetheless compelling.” Some of us know this well, to be drawn onto a path because of reasons that don’t make complete sense, yet knowing that there is at last no other way if we are to honor who we are, if we are to become who we are.

I recall sitting several years ago in Charlie Ortman’s office. Charlie is the minister of my home church in Montclair, New Jersey. I was talking with him about finding some way that I could return to that original calling of ministry that I had begun so many years before in seminary. I talked about the many detours I had taken for reasons that seemed completely explicable given life circumstances. I confided that I was longing, absolutely longing, to find my way back to ministry. And Charlie, having come to professional ministry later in life himself, looked me in the eye and said: “Ministry is what you do when you can’t do anything else!” Now I know there’s a twist side to this, but I also know what he was saying. It’s as if there’s no other choice; it pulls on every fiber of your being, as if to say: “Do I finally have your attention? No more excuses around readiness? No more, “yeah but’s?” After all, a life flees as quickly as a day. The clock is ticking, and with it, my life, your life, our lives.

“Let your life speak,” says Palmer. Vocation isn’t about a goal I pursue. Nor is it about “becoming successful,” a term so loaded in its assumptions about who is deemed worthy and on what terms. We are challenged not to confuse the calling that turned Samuel’s head with the cacophony of external seductions that lead us down paths foreign to the core of who we are. “Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it,” explains Palmer, “I must listen to my life telling me who I am.”

It is a great and precious gift to discover who we are. It is a great and precious gift to discover this in a community of fellow searchers. First Parish strives to be such a community. Part of our shared ministry is to help one another discern who we are and to lend the imprint of who we are to this religious community. It’s tempting to hear this as a bid to stay in our individual pods, to practice a spirituality that is intensely private. Yet we are called in community. We don’t do this work alone. We don’t experience the joy of discernment in isolation. And once we discover our own authentic selves, we are freed to walk out of whatever identities imprisoned us and make a difference in our larger world.

We inhabit a series of concentric circles, if you will. The innermost circle is God bidding us to honor the distinctive miracle of who we are. That stone having been dropped into our pool, ripples outward. With glad authenticity, we connect freshly with one another and find that we must respond to the hurts in our larger world, because the voice that speaks from the inner circle

follows us to the farthest reaches of those outer circles. We discover together the meaning of communal abundance. No longer knotted in the immobilizing postures of scarcity of spirit, we are freed to stretch our limbs and become a church whose byword is abundance.

“...mingle my calling with all who will share” we sang earlier.

“Abundance,” observes Palmer, “is created when we have the sense to choose community, to come together to celebrate and share our common store,” when our individual calling is mingled with all who can and do share.

The clock is ticking. Our days are in flight. How is my life speaking? How is your life speaking? How is our communal life speaking? How are we professing the abundance that is ours through being true to our most loving, compassionate, call-heeding selves?

Why did we join this community of discovery and discernment and faith in the first place? Why did we join this Unitarian Universalist church, asks Dr. John Wolf, Minister Emeritus of All Souls Unitarian in Tulsa, Oklahoma? His response? To support it. To support what brings us together into a circle of seeking questioning, listening, call-heeding selves. To support it because it makes us laugh and bids us emotional safety when we need to cry. To support it because it affirms our conscience and calls us to “mingle our calling with all who will share.”

Imagine that this day holds the totality of your life. Imagine that this day holds the totality of our life together. To what are we called as the long hand bends in its sure and steady arc, with the short hand in close pursuit? We are called to listen as the God of Samuel speaks to us. We are called to seek forgiveness for all we have done that betrays our call, to all we have neglected that dishonors our call. We are called to honesty that we might hear clearly the call to discipleship in this community of caring possibility. And yes, we are called to support our communal journey and to find our communal soul.

What is the value to each of us in so engaging? Priceless, surely priceless. And what, my friends, is the cost? What is the cost of our calling to community through the life of this parish? What does it cost to be all the church we can be? It is specific. It comes in the form of our pledge. Pledging is our act of defining the currency of our response to the truth, the power, and the possibility of our call to be most profoundly who we are.

You are a generous congregation. You are a lovable congregation. The rise of your generosity follows the arc of response to our call to religious community. This call and our response lie “at the intersection of the past we have inherited and the future we are creating.” This call and our response bid me to recognize once again your lovable spirits and to say once again, I love you. Amen.

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