

“Being Called”

Sermon by the Rev. Joe Summers for January 22, 2012

(Readings for the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany:

Jonah 3:1-5,10, Psalm 84, I Corinthians 7:29-31, Mark 1:14-20)

“How dear to me is your dwelling place.” How dear to me is the place where we experience God’s living presence. That’s what we hear in our psalm today. It is so true and so powerful, it should make us really think about when and where we experience God’s living presence. At the same time, Jesus challenged us to recognize that we can only begin to comprehend the Infinite Divine through embracing paradox. Thus we also hear in the Letter to the Hebrews (10:31) that “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God,” or as other translations put it, “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” These seemingly opposite statements are both powerfully true, in my experience.

Our lessons today all speak of the mysterious call of the Infinite. Jonah is called to help save a people he hates, his people’s enemies, the wealthy imperialist Ninevites. Paul, the guy who loved law and order, is called to live as if there is no set order to help facilitate the passing away of the forms of the world. Simon and Andrew, two whom I suspect loved their daily lives as fisherman and loved their family, yet in hearing Jesus’ invitation, they are impelled to leave everything behind. They leave their father in a boat with hired men. What bitter painful words those are. If you love your family, you want to take care of them yourself--not leave them with hired staff. And what are they leaving their home and those they love for? Someone who promises to make them “fishers of people.” What the hell does that mean? No, that answer doesn’t explain anything, so it must be that somehow, in Jesus, they felt the call of the Mysterious Unknown. It is the same journey into the unknown that Abraham felt. It is the same call into the unknown that marks every real call into faith.

Whether we recognize it or not, the call of the Infinite is why we are gathered here in worship. It’s why we’ll gather for our annual meeting after church today. The call of the Infinite is not an easy call. It’s not for the weak hearted for “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

It is much more comfortable to live in our little boxes: set ideas about who we are, who others are, what we are to be about. Lived reality is much more painful, much more confusing. Because they are things which we’ve created, almost by definition, idols don’t really challenge us. But living in relationship to this mysterious force that lives within us, lives among us, that’s a whole different ball game. Discomfort doesn’t begin to capture it. “Mighty Dread”, is a favorite Rastafarian term for the Divine. It comes much closer for the living God takes us beyond what we know, beyond ourselves, beyond the world of certainty, to the edge of the unknown, the abyss, and--- calls us into it. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

The word which is translated “church” in the New Testament is the word Ekklesia, which comes from the Greek “Kaleo”, “call” with the prefix “Ek” or “out.” So the word church literally

means “those who are called out.” It was commonly a political word, as when people were called out for a meeting. In the Greek world those who were free were called into assemblies to determine how to run their communal life. But we also know this call to be about something much deeper and mysterious, this movement within us that pushes us out of our comfort zones, out of our little boxes, into the realm of the living, into being in relationship to the living, fluid, complex, mysterious, nature of reality and the One who is at the heart of it.

The word “church” was used to distinguish the gatherings of early Christians from those who gathered in synagogues, but, in reality, the words were synonymous. Synagogue mean “come together.” Part of the mystery of the call of the divine is that it calls us to embrace the diversity of one another by calling us into interdependent relationship with those who are our opposites. That’s another way of being called out. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

The Philosopher Kierkegaard says that “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” That sounds so nice and so simple. But Kierkegaard understood that our hearts are called in opposite directions, multiple directions. We are called to love our families, yet also called to go out and create a new heavens and earth; we are called to love daily ordinary life, and yet also called to wrestle with the grandest of ideas; we are called to be in relationship with our family and loved ones, yet also called to love the world. Therefore, for Kierkegaard, the faith journey, the journey towards this purity of heart, is a journey of wrestling with these contradictory calls, these conflicting loves, letting our hearts be broken by them, until they give us the blessing of a path that integrates them all. At least that’s the idea.

In terms of our individual journeys, I’m not sure we can ever do it. Increasingly, I suspect we aren’t even called to do it, at least not as individuals. As near as I can tell, none of us can do it all. Instead, if there is any emergence of a single unified path, it happens through community. Only as communities can we really pursue opposite directions at the same time, and out of these paradoxical paths, discover the unity amidst diversity of the Infinite.

I’m so struck by how concrete this is. Into this same community, one is called who has an incredible gift for hearing God through the over-againstness of our scriptures, and another is called who has an incredible gift for hearing God and opening the door to divine presence in our experience. Into this same community, one is called who is being called into the hidden wholeness of the silence of God, and another is called to encounter the living God in and through conflict, the God who is revealed, when we creatively and imaginatively re-define conflicts, so that they become a source of blessing. In this same community, one is being called to risk being in relationship with others through having the kind of conversations with others they have never had before, and another is being called to risk entering into silence and solitude, one to take the risk of taking the kinds of actions they have never taken before, another the risk of learning to do nothing. Blessed are the wounds. So often we discover our calls are related to a grace that we discover only in and through the wounds life has given us. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

The call of the Infinite, terribly mysterious, yet terribly important. Many of us find that we thought we were called one direction, only to realize we were really being called to a very different place. Sometimes we even find ourselves being called in an opposite direction from where we felt called previously. That's confusing. To be able to discern our calls, we have to create a space of freedom. If we feel coerced in one direction or another, we may not hear the still small voice, the call of the silence, within us.

When this church helps people follow their call--I'm happy. I may not like it if they are called elsewhere, but that's not my business, so I live with it. However, I'm deeply frustrated if I feel people leave here without discovering what their call is about, for I don't think anyone walks through the door here without some sense of call. It's just not that easy to get up on Sunday morning and come into the discomfort of being with strangers, if there weren't some kind of call. So how do we create the kind of space that helps us each to listen for how we're being called, without being coercive about it?

This church, as an assembly of those who are called out, cannot be about what we are to be about unless each of you listen to your call: what's moving you, what's inspiring you? where do you find energy? where do you find healing? where do you find joy? where do you find liberation? where do you find heaven on earth? Collectively we cannot be those who are called out of the world as it is--into the new creation---unless each of you is listening, helping us to move into the mysterious unknown of the new creation and new being.

The Holy Spirit is a wild Spirit that will not be contained by our prescriptions for where and how It should be acting. Often, in retrospect, we can see how It was calling us into the very last place we thought to find It: in the bar rooms where jazz was born, into the midst of conflicts around race, class, and gender, into something as mysterious as our bodies and our desires. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

At its best, the church here on earth is always radically imperfect. Being called is always pretty messy. It's not something you can get "right", because it's a creative process happening in the midst of death and rebirth. Death is always messy. Birth is always messy. At the heart of church is this call by the Mysterious Unknown, into the mysterious unknown. It is a call to walk the Holy Way: the way that creates the way where there is no way, the path that reconnects what has become disconnected, that re-members what has become dis-membered, the way that allows us to put love and understanding where there is no love and understanding, the way that allows us to move from where we are to where we need to go.

This is the day the Lord, the great Mysterious Unknown, has made; let us be glad and rejoice in it. Let us this day receive the gift of this grace and act on it by practicing grace, by being grace, for one another and for the world.

For if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.