

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

January 31, 2016; the 4th Sunday after the Epiphany

Readings: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 14:21-30.

Knowing In Part

In last Sunday's sermon, I preached about the importance of time. That time is God's creation; that the time is always right to be about the work of God, to be a co-creator with God to make the reign of God visible. That the time is now be about that which brings healing and justice.

When Jesus stood up in the synagogue and read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, saying that the scripture had been fulfilled in their hearing, saying that he is the one sent by God to bring healing, to bring forgiveness, to bring sight, to bring justice, to bring mercy to us and to all people, the people were stunned; and we hear, they thought well of him, characterizing his words as gracious...at first.

They thought well of Jesus, until he started to challenge their expectations...challenge their long-held beliefs and understanding...until Jesus started to include all people in God's plan for salvation. Jesus reminds them of the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath: there were many widows in Israel, but God called God's prophet Elijah to go to an unbeliever, an outsider...to make God's power known, visible in the world. And if that wasn't bad enough, then Jesus reminds them of Elisha and Naaman: there were many with leprosy in Israel but it is Naaman the unbeliever who is healed and as a result praises God and comes to believe. Those in the synagogue didn't want to hear any of that, and who can blame them? What Jesus was saying, though there was evidence of it their sacred stories, was not the way most people thought about God and how God's love and justice worked.

Are we really any different?

What could I say that would be shocking?

Perhaps, depending on your preferred political party, would it be shocking to consider that God would work through Donald Trump or Hilary Clinton?

That is the sort of shock it was for those listening to Jesus.

The people who heard Jesus open up Isaiah's words of grace for all people, tried to throw him off the cliff.

Are we much different?

We too are products of our time, products of our circumstances.

What is exciting about God and being a follower of God, is that God invites us into God's great vision for us and our world...God's vision is one that we know and understand in a limited way...to say that is both troubling (because we want to get it right) and exciting (because God will get it right, and bring us along).

I find the words from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, comforting and exciting:

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

We won't always get it right---for our knowledge is limited, we see only in part---but we live in the light of God's love.

Greater than our faith, greater than even our hope, is God's love.

It was through God's love that the earth was created, that we were born...God's love sustains us...God's love guides us...God's love holds us...and one day we will know fully God's love even as we have been fully known.

Until that day, God has called us into life in this time and place, for a reason...for many reasons...each one of us.

Time is God's creation; God is bigger than time, but God acts in time...through the life of Jesus, God acted in a particular time and place, and God continues to act through our lives in this time and place.

Because God is so much more that we can understand, so much more loving, so much more merciful, when God acts to bring about God's reign on earth, people are often confused, surprised, sometimes overjoyed and sometimes angry.

The Bible is filled with stories of those who are called by God, and the confusion and lack of certainty in their abilities that often goes with a call or a commission from God.

Consider Jeremiah, who was a harsh prophet, who called the people to account, he was not so sure about God's call to him as presented in his call story.

Jeremiah needed a good call story to support his radical prophetic voice. God is clear that Jeremiah's call is not based on Jeremiah but based on God, who knew Jeremiah before he was born:

Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you,

When it is a true call from God, God makes it possible.

Being God's prophet is not easy; answering any call from God is often not easy, but through the power of the Spirit we are supported in answering calls from God.

Not that we need to spend a lot of time on the Primates meeting, but in this

context of call, I bring it up because I believe that the Episcopal Church has been called by God to witness to God's inclusive love in a way that bothers some people and does have consequences. The Rt. Rev. Marriann Budde, bishop of Washington D.C., puts it this way:

I regret that the primates' decision has caused pain to those who have been deeply wounded by prejudice in the church they love because of their sexual orientation. But I am also confident in the decisions we as the Episcopal Church have made, based on over 40 years' engagement with Scripture and one another, on issues of human sexuality. While not all in the Episcopal Church agree with those decisions, they are as solid as earlier decisions made regarding the full inclusion of women in leadership, our positions on divorce, and our commitment to racial justice. That there is a cost for making decisions that we believe are faithful to the love of Jesus is not a surprise to us. We have always known as Episcopalians that we might face consequences for declaring, unequivocally, that LGBT Christians are beloved members of the Body of Christ. Those consequences are insignificant in comparison with the rejection, marginalization and violence LGBT Christians have been asked to endure, even in their churches.¹ The way Bishop Budde speak of this issue, gives us insight into how discernment and call work in many situations. And every call has consequences...immediate and eternal.

Jesus was able to escape from that crowd that wanted to throw him off the cliff, but later Jesus would be in the garden of Gethsemane unsure of this call from God that seemed to demand his life, and he asked that God release him from that call...if this sort of struggle with call was true for Jesus, can we expect anything else?

Having a call can be experienced in many ways, of course. Sometimes it is so clear, and even if it is demanding, God gives us the energy for it.

In the end, Jesus understood the call on his life to be God's sacrificial Love; and Jesus was able to answer that call.

¹ <http://www.edow.org/blog/walk-in-love-a-letter-from-bishop-mariann-on-the-primates-meeting/>

But Jesus questioned and struggled, and so do we.
We, like Jesus, discern whether or not we are called to something.

For example, are you feeling called to be on the vestry or another ministry
in our church?

There may be some questioning and struggle in your heart about that.
As our current vestry members will probably tell you, the hardest part about
accepting God's call to stand for election to our vestry was concern
based on the past, before I got here.

Being on the vestry is fun now! Well, most of the time anyway.

And our meetings last for only two hours, once a month.

How does one know if they have a call to be on our vestry or a call to offer
your gifts to the church in another way?

That is where discernment comes in.

Discernment to a call, be of ordination leadership or lay leadership,
happens between the person and God, and in community.

Did you know that in our diocese we offer discernment retreats several
times a year for people feeling a sense of call to leadership in the
church, lay or ordained?

For so long, in the church, people thought about call being something that
leads to ordination exclusively, but that is not at all true.

In fact, sometimes people's love for God and desire to follow God causes
them to think that they are called to be a deacon or a priest when
they are not.

Everyone is called to love God deeply and follow God and help
others follow God...that is every Christian's vocation, and
a beautiful one it is.

Baptism is everyone's ordination to their Christian vocation.

In the February Messenger, our monthly parish newsletter, you will find an
article by church member George Collier, in which George
describes the development of his call to be involved in many
ways at the church and about his sense of call to be on the vestry---how

the sense of call developed over time.

Rather than call, George uses the word invitation, which I like a lot.

Each one of you has an invitation to get involved here in ways that will help us be the church God is creating us to be, and in ways that will enrich your life and strengthen your spirit.

Our baptism is our invitation from God to get involved, and God's invitation comes with support from the Holy Spirit and from our community.

In a true call from God, God makes it possible.

What is your call? What is the invitation God and this church is offering to you?

What gives you energy when you think about it?

Is it something that is new to you or something that you have done in the past?

Is it time to give something up in order to be open to a new invitation?

Discernment and call happen in the midst of life...in this time and this place.

We are all called, we are all invited, to be part of God's great love for the world...we do not understand it fully, we might not always get it right, but we live in the light of God's love; may the light of God, the energy of the Holy Spirit help us to accept God's invitation to be a co-creator with God, to make the world a better, more inclusive place, and to share God's love with others. Amen.