

Called to the Abundant Life

Sermon: January 14, 2018/ St. Peter's Cathedral, Helena, Montana

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Good morning!

We are now in the Second Sunday of Epiphany where we continue the theme of Call, Jesus' call and his claim on our lives. We heard of a very famous call from the Old Testament, the call of the boy Samuel. Samuel, of course is the miracle child of his mother Hannah, who pleads for a son and then receives Samuel, whose name means 'I have asked him of the Lord'. Samuel is placed in the charge of the priest Eli to whom Hannah promised, that if she conceived a son, she would give him to Eli as a Nazirite.

Samuel is living with Eli when he hears a call from God. But he thinks it is Eli calling. Eli says that he did not call him and that he should go back to sleep. But the Lord calls again and again. Finally, Eli realizes that it is the Lord calling and he instructs Samuel that if God calls again, say, 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.'

Eli is a very tragic character. He is old and in great anguish, because his two sons were blaspheming the Lord in the Temple by misusing holy offerings of food. Eli knew this for some time, but he refused to restrain them. Eli's story is tragic because he was faithful earlier in his life, but his life deteriorated. His life would not end well. But when Samuel was placed in his charge, Eli had enough faith to recognize a call from God and instruct Samuel to listen. So this famous story in the Old Testament is about the call of the young Samuel, but it is also a story about a priest who was unfaithful to his call and whose life ends tragically. As wonderful as God's call is, it is possible for us to be unfaithful to our calling.

Now I want to shift to the passage we heard from the Gospel of John, which is Jesus' calling of Philip and Nathaniel. Jesus goes to Galilee, meets Philip and immediately says to him, "Follow me". As soon as Philip becomes a disciple he finds his friend Nathaniel and tells him that he has found the Messiah. He bids Nathaniel to 'come and see'. When Jesus sees Nathaniel, he describes him as 'one who is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.' Nathaniel is converted,

and Jesus promises that 'You will see greater things, than these. Jesus' call to Nathaniel and to each of us, is a life of adventure where we will see great things.

What I want to preach about today is Jesus' call to an abundant life. Later in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "I have come that you may have life and have it in all its abundance." I want to talk about sharing our faith in Jesus with others and then I want to talk about why this life we are called to is the life most worth living.

Years ago, I pursued a man in my congregation who had dropped out of the parish. I arranged to call on the couple at their home as a part of my meeting everyone in the parish. When I called, only the wife was there, and she seemed fairly uncomfortable with my being there! I found out later that the husband was irritated that I was calling on them and had said to his wife, you made the appointment, you can keep it, but I have work to do! After the uncomfortable visit ended, I was distracted by the husband's absence, so I did something very unusual. I called the man up at his business and told him I wanted take him out to lunch. He agreed to that and we had an hour together. I cannot reconstruct all that we said, but what he remembers is that I said to him, 'John, I need you in this church, because we have a lot of work to do.

He came back to church, he and his wife made incredible contributions to the life of our parish and today, he and his wife, Sherry and me, remain the closest of friends. It is also fair to say that Jesus began to make some big changes in our lives and since then we have seen many great things.

Now, why do I tell that story on a day when the scripture is clearly talking about call and bringing people to Jesus? I tell it because it is one example of how I once brought someone to Christ. At the same time, I tell it with some regret that I did not do the same thing more often with more people...

Now, I want to say some important things about the life Jesus calls us to, the life that Jesus promises to be 'an abundant life.' What is it? What is the life Jesus says is abundant? What is he talking about?

For a start, the abundant life is not the affluent life. It is not about how much stuff we possess or the goal some have of becoming independently wealthy as young as possible so we can retire and be idle for the rest of our lives.

I want to describe 'the abundant life' Jesus was talking about in three ways.

First, Jesus was talking about the priority of relationships. Human life is all about relationships. I first learned that, way back in the first summer of seminary training. We were required to do clinical training in a hospital or a mental hospital or other facility. I was in a state mental hospital and one day we had a lecture which changed my life. The title of the lecture was, 'Life is relationship'. The lecturer talked about how the only way you can have life is to be in relationship with others. Right from the start of human life, an infant in the womb can only have life if she is in relationship with her mother. The teacher went on to say that the basic reason why people were patients in the state mental hospital was because they had a very difficult time being able to relate to anyone. Life is relationship. Life is about our relationship to God and about our relationships to one another. Our God is a Holy Trinity of relationships which gives life to the world. We are to live in the image of God. What makes human life flourish is love, unconditional love and caring.

Second to the abundant life is 'Forgiveness'. Forgiveness is essential to the healing of human relationship when they are broken. The central contribution Jesus came to give us is 'Forgiveness'. Without forgiveness, nothing could ever change in a broken relationship. Without forgiveness there could be no reversal of a broken relationship. We are called to a life of forgiveness because we have first been forgiven. And who among us does not stand in need of a lavish mercy?

Third, a full and abundant life involves self-giving—SELF-GIVING. That term may be strange to some of you. It was strange to me until about half way through my adult life, when I went back to school and found myself studying The Holy Trinity. In studying The Holy Trinity, I had to read a theologian who described the 'inner life' of the Holy Trinity as one of 'self-giving'. All three persons of the Holy Trinity give themselves fully to the other and by so doing, the Holy Trinity not only gives life to each person, but overflows in giving life to the world. All of us are called to live in the image of God, so we experience the fullest life when we give everything we have to the well-being of others. An abundant life happens when we give all we have for the well-being of others. Let me give you a good example of what I am talking about. My father-in-law fought in the Navy during the Second World War. I learned, soon after I met him, that he would talk about the war as one of

the most meaningful times of his life. It was not always pleasant, but it was meaningful. It was a time when he sacrificed his life for his country. That is what I mean by '**self-giving**' as part of the abundant life to which Jesus calls us. This self-giving usually involves our work. It involves the work we do and the gifts God has given us to do it. God gave us life to give out of the gifts, we have first been given.

The Abundant life is about the priority of relationships and loving one another as God has loved us.

The abundant life is about forgiveness which is the essence of Jesus' ministry and the essential ingredient to the healing of broken relationships.

The abundant life is about self-giving of ourselves out of the gifts we have been given. Self-giving lies at the center of the relationships among the persons of the Holy Trinity. We who are called to live in the image of God experience life at its most abundant when we are able to give fully for the welfare of others.

This is the abundant life to which Jesus has called each of us. It is a life which promises adventure, surprise and seeing greater things. May we who have been called to this life, have the eyes to see God at work in the world, the grace to follow where he leads, and the love to serve, so that our lives and the lives of all we touch, may flourish. Amen