



First United Church of Oak Park

The Call of the Divine

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13 and 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

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It's true that God's ways are mysterious. Our ancient witness reading this morning from the Old Testament inspires a sense of wonder through a narrative illustration of God's power to take small things, and people, and make them great. Today I want to explore the question of how to discern the Divine's calling for each of us, small people as we are.

This topic of discerning the calling of the universe is of personal interest to me. You see, after forty-eight years of continuous employment, my husband Paul has retired, and I am semi-retired. I have to admit that I've been much more anxious about retirement than Paul. Paul is able to live in the moment, taking each day as it comes. I, on the other hand, am used to a full calendar with something scheduled morning, noon, and night. It has taken me a while to appreciate the unstructured nature of retirement. It's also taken a while to find our rhythm as a couple. I have had to explain to Paul a number of times that I married him for life, not for lunch. And Paul has been a real sport as I have binged on *Grey's Anatomy*. Paul is not terribly fond of TV to start with, and the lascivious love lives of the characters in that show tend to drive him out of his mind. But, bless his heart, he puts up with me watching it anyway.

I have heard that a good formula for retirement is to spend a third of your time learning, a third of your time volunteering, and a third of your time relaxing and having fun. The opportunities for learning are abundant here in the Oak Park and the Chicago area. I understand that Northwestern has a wonderful cadre of courses open to adult learners, as do all the City of Chicago colleges, along with other educational institutions. So that's not a problem. And having fun is pretty easy, especially with grandchildren who are thrilled to see Grandma and Grandpa. Therefore, I believe the big question of retirement boils down to how to spend the rest of the time we have in a way that is important in the eyes of the universe.

In the story of David's anointing by Samuel as the next king of Israel, tension builds as God mysteriously instructs the prophet Samuel not to anoint the obvious choices, the ones the political consultants or pundits would choose today — the ones with the best numbers in the polls or the best faces for television — the ones who somehow appear most qualified or capable because they are older or stronger or more impressive.

"Surely God's anointed is now before the Divine," Samuel thinks as he looks at Eliab, the fine elder son of Jesse. In some enigmatic way, however, Samuel understands that God is concerned with the unseen, the heart of the person and the very center and core of the one to be anointed. After rejecting all the older sons, Jesse was asked to bring in the little one, the one left out, the one not considered or included. He was asked to bring in David, the little boy shepherd. Through the wisdom of Samuel, the divine made David a shepherd-king, anointed by God to lead the people and to live on throughout their history as the greatest of kings, the hope of the people, and a vision for the future.

Ironically, our text actually dwells a bit on the very thing that we are warned against emphasizing — David's good looks. These good looks will cause problems for David later on in life. Remember Bathsheba and the mayhem that ensued because of David's lust? But when he is chosen, the little boy is a shepherd, and it's not unreasonable for us to think that he was a good one, which seems to suggest he'd be a good king as well for Israel, who used that image of the shepherd for its rulers. Shepherds stay with the sheep, lead them to food and water, protect them from animals and thieves, tend their injuries, and discipline them.

The anointing of David takes place while King Saul, who David replaced, is still on the throne. What's interesting about this fact is that it suggests that God is often providentially active even before others are aware of need. That claim might lead us to look on the story of our lives, and the life of our church community, and see God's hand at work in ways just as surprising, just as unlikely, as it was in the story of David and the kings of Israel who followed him. Whose need might God be addressing, through us? And even more interestingly, when in our church life did the divine become active when there was a need? What seeds did our God of wisdom plant long before the church body was consciously aware of a change of direction or ministry?

I have two questions, and I don't have answers for either one of them. I ask them as food for thought. Are there or were there potential leaders at First United Church or in the Oak Park community who have been kept from exercising their God-given gifts for

leadership because they didn't "look" the way we expect a leader to look? We are told that we should not look with our eyes at outward appearances, but to see, as God does, the heart of the person. The various ways in which men and women in our and every age are tempted to do just the opposite can be documented in our racism, our sexism, and our various forms of idolatry — love of money, clothing, glitzy automobiles, and the like. Our challenge, of course, is to see beyond "characteristics" to the character within a person.

Secondly, and even more important for us today, while we are not David, not destined to be rulers, we still ask that important question: What is my role, in God's eyes? And how will I be able to do what the universe calls me to do?

As a minister, I get asked the question a lot, "What is God's will for me?" The idea that the Spirit of God works through our circumstances and choices, through the things that happen to us, has given me a helpful perspective from which to view my own life and the lives of those I journey with. Perspective is important. Our decisions and how we live our lives are based on how we see things. In that sense, perspective is often even more important than reality.

I was ordained twelve years ago, but I considered going to seminary for years before I actually took the first step towards ordination. What initially kept me running away from the call to pastoral ministry was the belief that I would have to become something I'm not. All the stereotypes of pastors — they're perfect people, they're unbelievably pious, they don't swear or drink or have fun, they're always kind — scared me and kept me running. I was afraid that my brain and personality would have to be surgically or spiritually removed and replaced with the "pastor's package." I wasn't sure what that was, but I was certain it couldn't be me.

When I finally got up the courage to take a seminary class, I realized that God was calling me to be nothing more than who I was created to be. I hate to reveal this truth to all of you, but seminaries are full of very ordinary people, only some of whom eventually become ministers. Once in seminary, I felt a deep peace when it was clear that I fit in — that my past experiences and my passions and interests would shape the way I would live out my calling as a pastor. The role of the Holy Spirit, urging us to try something that might be initially uncomfortable, can be a key in revealing to us what the divine expects.

I recently began to see a familiar Scripture passage with new eyes. In 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, the Apostle Paul writes, “Dear brothers and sisters, when I first came to you I didn’t use lofty words and brilliant ideas to tell you God’s message. I came to you in weakness — timid and trembling. And my message and my preaching were very plain. I did not use wise and persuasive speeches, but the Holy Spirit was powerful among you. I did this so that you might trust the power of God rather than human wisdom.”

What strikes me is the phrase, “I came to you, timid and trembling.” I’m thinking of my granddaughter Lily’s first day of kindergarten. She was led into that classroom sobbing and shaking. My heart was broken as I watched her, thinking of my first day at a summer job when I was eighteen years old, timid and trembling, when my father had to practically push me out of the car so that I would walk through the door of the Service Container box factory where I eventually worked for the next three summers. I remember getting on the bus full of fear and trepidation going to Girl Scout camp. I distinctly remember the car ride to college, sitting in the back seat not knowing what was to come and feeling like I was falling into the abyss of the unfamiliar. I remember a year and a half ago sitting in John Edgerton’s office talking to him and Alicia about what I might have to offer as a minister at First United Church, not knowing if they would hear me or welcome me. Over and over again the Holy Spirit moves us to try new things, even if we are timid and trembling.

No matter how small and powerless we may feel, no matter how unlikely or unqualified we may seem to ourselves, we can still feel the power of God's spirit at work in us, and dream the dream that God has for this world. We look around and see the influence and effects of others, and we realize that we, too, can be a blessing in our individual lives, in the lives of others, and in the life of our church.

There are so many large and powerful entities that surround us as individuals and as churches. First United Church seems so small when compared to other organizations that attract the attention, time, and energy of our members. And yet, what hope lies beneath statistics and reports, what potential lies in giving voice to the smallest but persistent of witnesses, the evangelical courage, and the extravagant hospitality that express our commitment and describe our deepest hopes not only for our church but for the world beyond its walls!

We sometimes feel powerless alone, but we are strong together. This is why we go to church and this is why we are people of the divine spirit. With strength and courage let us each listen to the timid and trembling voice of the divine — the voice that urges us

to move out of our comfort zone into even the tiniest crack of the unknown. Even as seemingly insignificant people, we can make a difference. As quiet and trembling as that still, small voice is, I guarantee the Holy Spirit is in and among all of us.

Blessed be and thanks be to God.