

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

January 14, 2018

Second Sunday after Epiphany

I Samuel 3:1-10

Psalm 139:1-12

John 1:43-51

Have you ever had one of those weeks? You know....

Your spouse gets sick - the prolonged kind of really knock you out sick - and the division of labor in the household shifts dramatically.

And then your daughter has some stressors at school and really needs your attention and a good listening ear.

And there's a big storm and now there's shoveling and below zero weather making it a drag to be out and about.

And then the lights on the garage door opener go out, so every time you come into the garage it's pitch black as you make your way from the car to the house door, and your husband's too sick to fix it and it's too cold for you to fix it.

And then your microwave dies and it's not so easy to quickly replace a microwave.

And then you learn that a dear colleague and mentor (Dick Olmsted) has died.

And then at work, you discover that the financing you'd been counting on to sustain your team and their work just isn't there, and so the big project you've been working on for years comes to a screeching halt.

I trust you all got the letter we sent out about the need to press the pause button on the proposed building addition due to the significant shortfall in 2018 pledging.

Many of you have had hard weeks too - I've been on the phone with you, received your emails, sat with you over coffee or lunch or a glass of wine, read your facebook posts, visited you in the hospital...

Sometimes life is hard. Really hard. Producing more questions than answers. Big questions.

How did we get HERE?

What could I (or we) have done differently?

Did we miss something along the way?

What's it all for?

What's our purpose?

What's MY purpose?

What's next? What now?

God, are you speaking? Am I listening?

I've been looking for the Lord this week - for a good word from the Lord. And as usual, the Lord provides. Here are three devotions that landed in my inbox this week:

One Step at a time

There are times in our lives when God chooses not to show us the whole picture. Sometimes the only step we know to take is the one right in front of us.

When you are seeking to walk in God's ways, you can trust that He is guiding you. You might not understand why He is leading you in a certain direction, but I can guarantee He has good plans for you.

So don't be overwhelmed or concerned about your future. **Take it one step at a time.** Ask the Lord where He is leading you today and go forward without fear. (Christine Caine, Jan. 12)

Don't Give Up!

I want to encourage you today: Don't give up! Whenever you walk through hard times in this life, you can take comfort in the fact that God is working on your behalf. What the enemy meant for evil, our awesome God will work for good.

So, no matter what you are facing, remember that God is on your side. He is with you, and as you stay faithful, He will be glorified through your life. (Christine Caine, Jan. 11)

Evolve

At some point, Disciples turn into Apostles.

Jesus evolves the Disciples into Apostles, readying them to be sent out with a message. I for one am glad they let it happen; if they had chosen not to change, Christianity would have died when they did.

What stage of Christian evolution are you in? Do you go to church, try to live a good life, and leave it at that? Or do you talk with other people about it as well?

For the sake of everyone else in the break room who doesn't know how sweet faith can be, isn't it time to stand up to that loud atheist/fundamentalist/whatever at work?

Or do what one member of my church does: she periodically sets her Facebook status to something like, "Can't wait for church tomorrow! Anybody want to go with and then get brunch after?" You'd be surprised how many take her up on it. Or you could just be sure your FB profile lists your religion and a link to your church. Or you could write a letter to the editor—explicitly as a Christian—on an issue of the day. Or...well, you get the point: be creative.

Do you think Christianity—or your flavor of it—matters enough to be kept alive, or are you happy to let it die with you? If the latter, then enjoy your discipleship. If the former, it's time to evolve. (Quinn G. Caldwell, Jan. 12)

Martin Luther said this:

This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness; not health, but healing; not being, but becoming; not rest, but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished, but it is going on. This is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified. (Martin Luther)

The good news is that God is not done with us! In fact, God will never be done, will never give up, will keep showering us with grace and inviting us to become more, even as He loves us just as we are.

And so we have before us the “gracious invitation” of our Lord. Perhaps it will result in Nathaniel’s rather stunning reversal and confession. Perhaps it will take far longer, as it does with Nicodemus, who leaves his first encounter with Jesus utterly perplexed, only to show up again at his trial, and after his crucifixion near the end of the story.

Perhaps it will empower you to witness to your friends and neighbors what you have experienced, as it does with the woman at the well. Or perhaps it will give you the courage to face the adversity in your life, as it does the man who receives his sight.

Who knows! But we do know that Jesus keeps extending that invitation to us—to become the persons and the church that God has called us to be, and that the world needs.

Even when we fall short.

Even when we have a hard time believing.

Even when we have the week from hell.

Even when we have a hard time getting ourselves to church... or preparing a sermon... or making a pledge.

Yet Jesus is still there, always inviting and forgiving and redeeming...and all out of the love that he embodies, incarnates, and offers.

You see, our God is a calling God. Throughout all time, we find God calling people to carry out certain tasks -wealthy and settled Abraham was called to leave everything and go to a land that God would show him; the reluctant Moses was called to lead the people of Israel to freedom; the cheat and thief Matthew was called to be a disciple; the Christian hater, Saul of Tarsus, was called to be a missionary to the Gentiles.

At first it seems as if God doesn't know what he's doing by calling these people to embody His love and bring about His Kingdom. When Jesus called Peter and James and John they were simple fishermen with no special qualifications. At times they were extremely dense and slow to catch on, but he called them anyway.

Clearly, the people whom God calls to do his work are just ordinary people with weaknesses and shortcomings, people with their fair share of family problems, people who don't seem to have much going for them at the time.

But God knows what he is doing.

In every case, God is fully aware of their lack of confidence and skills. What takes them from ordinary to extraordinary is that they said YES! That even in the darkness of uncertainty, when the way before them was not clear, somehow they stayed on course.

And it's not any different for us today. God still calls ordinary people like us. He still challenges us; he still confronts us and tests us. He still calls us to do his work in this world, even though we can think of a million reasons why he has chosen the wrong person.

Like the people whom God called in the Bible, our first reaction may be: "Who me? Who us?" It's not hard for us to find every excuse under the sun and explain earnestly to ourselves (and to God) that this is not the best time, that there are others who are able to do this better, that we don't have the time, or that we would be too scared to do anything like that.

God knows that we have bad days and hard weeks.

But still he holds his call on our lives before us - loving us, assuring us that we are His beloved children; forgiving us and promising to help us, to guide and to give us the skills and the strength to fulfill the challenge before us.

When God calls ordinary people like us to be his disciples,
to invite others to come and see Jesus as Philip did for Nathaniel,
to do acts of love and kindness,
to be Christian parents and grandparents,
to be active and faithful members of the church,
or whatever it might be that God calls us to do,
may our response be the same as little Samuel.

When God called, Samuel replied, "*I'm listening, Lord. What do you want me to do?*"

What do you want us to do?

Amen.