

## The Call of Samuel and Our Callings

### I Samuel 3: 1-10

Today I want to talk about the call of the boy Samuel and our callings. Growing up in Southern Baptist Land, what Carlyle Marney called “South of God”, and in a family of ministers, talk about God’s call was always in the air.

Today I realize I was looking at vocation and calling through the wrong end of the telescope or funnel. I was looking through the large end to the small end. Calling and vocation had to do with church-related vocations, what we called “full-time Christian service”—for example, a minister or missionary.

But now I look through the small end to the large end and see calling and vocation in a much broader sense: becoming partners with God and God’s purposes in the world. Martin Luther revolutionized the idea of calling. In his day, the only ones who were said to have a vocation were priests, nuns and monks. But Luther said that the cobbler making shoes was serving God as surely as the monk at his prayers! Our callings are endless: poets, painters, farmers, teachers, doctors, social workers, the calling to parenthood or to public service. Scientists too. The 16<sup>th</sup> century scientist, Johann Kepler said of his work that he was “thinking God’s thoughts after Him.”

In a short-story by Andre Dubus, an older priest looking over his life as a priest said some priests went to seminary to move up in the ranks like young cadets. Some went to seminary to work out their neuroses. But there was third group. These went into the priesthood “to live their lives with God.” These he said, had a “vocation.”

That is the heart of vocation for us all: to live our lives with God and see where that love takes us.

## I

The call of Samuel happened this way. Hannah and her husband Elkanah had longed for a child for many years. When Samuel was born they dedicated him to God, so as a boy he went to live in the house of the Lord to serve the aging priest Eli.

One night as he lay on his cot he heard a voice saying, “Samuel, Samuel”. Thinking it was the voice of Eli, he went to his room and said, “Here I am, for you called.” Eli told him he had not called and to go back and lie down. It happened a second time, God calling him by name, and again Samuel went to Eli’s room. And Eli again said he did not call and to go back and get some sleep. It happened a third time, and this time Eli discerned this must be the Lord’s voice. He

instructed young Samuel to go back to his cot and if it happened again, say, “Speak Lord, for you servant is listening.”

God did call again, and Samuel said, “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” Samuel went on to become an important leader of the Hebrew people. He *kept listening* to God, for God all his life.

To be clear, God has never spoken to me like that. There’s a novel about a liberal minister in a liberal congregation in Chapel Hill. One day God spoke to him directly. It ruined his life as a pastor. The church, as he, had become comfortable with a God that didn’t do things like that!

But I do think we have moments when we say to God: *Here I am! Speak Lord for you servant is listening!* How do we listen? Living in a community who keeps God’s word in scripture alive is important.

It also involves listening to your own life. Parker Palmer, a Quaker educator and spiritual writer says that he erred earlier in his life by thinking his vocation came in imitating people he most admired. But now he realized we must let our *own life* speak to us as we discern our calling.<sup>1</sup> Imitating the people we most admire may be important on the road to vocation, but it is not our vocation itself.

There's a rabbinic story about a man named Josef who kept crying out to God, "God make me like Abraham!" God responded, "I already have an Abraham, I want a Josef."

Some people get a sense of their vocation early. It was Amateur Night at the Harlem Opera House. A skinny awkward sixteen-year-old girl came onto the stage. The announcer said, "The next contestant is Ella Fitzgerald and she's gonna dance for us." "Hold it folks", and he leaned down to hear what she whispered in his ear." "She said, 'I'm not gonna dance, I'm gonna sing.'" And sing she did and won the contest and never stopped singing.

For some of us it takes a while. Finding one's calling begins at the level of our *being*, our personhood. Thomas Merton wrote "For me to be a saint means to be myself."<sup>1</sup> That is, as we discover our true self. The more you know God, the more you know your true self. The more you know your true self, the more you know God.

The journey to the true self is not an easy or quick journey. The poet May Sarton wrote:

Now I have become myself. It's taken  
Time, many years and places,

I've been dissolved and shaken,  
Worn other people's faces.<sup>2</sup>

When I was a young teenager I went to a Baptist assembly by the sea. I was in a worship service, and the invitation included a call to “full-time Christian service.” I was overwhelmed by someone or something tugging at my heart. I went down the aisle during the invitation time. I was told to sit on the front row until after the service. A well-meaning woman came and sat by me with a card to fill out. “What kind of ‘full-time Christian service’ have you chosen?” On the card you could check off “minister” or “missionary”, etc. I suddenly felt awkward and emotional. *What kind?* I hadn't even started shaving yet! I exited the building, full of emotion and went to the Snack Shack. I ordered an orange soda and have never like orange soda since. It was years later, after hearing a lot of voices in my head, family, church, culture, that I discerned my calling to be a minister. And all my life I have sought to discern what being a minister meant from one situation to another, one year to another.

What is “full-time Christian service”? Now I see clearer. It is, as Jesus described it, the love of God with all we are and the love of neighbor as ourselves. Love in all its ways and forms is the heart of calling and vocation. And the truest calling and deepest purpose of the *church* is this: “The increase in the love of God and neighbor.”

We use words like job, work, profession, career. Your calling may or may not have to do with words like those. It may have a paycheck attached or may not. It may be in the *way* you do your work, not in the work itself. It may be your *avocation*, what you do outside your work. It may be what the poet Donald Hall calls our “life-work”—when your work is also your devotion.

Finally, I believe that Christian vocation is always tied to some service to others, service in the broadest sense of the term. It was for Jesus, who announced, “The Spirit of God has anointed me,

To preach good news to the poor  
 release to the captives  
 the recovery of sight to the blind  
 and bring liberty to the oppressed, (or bruised).

Frederick Buechner’s words about calling and vocation have been most helpful to me. God calls us, he says, to the meeting place of our great joy on the one hand and the world’s great need on the other. He writes:

Neither the hair shirt nor the soft perch will do. The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s great hunger meet.<sup>3</sup>

There is such a meeting place for us all. And it may change and shift from one season or another. We may think our calling is not significant, but they’re all

significant to God and to others. As Mother Teresa said, “Do small things with great love.”

Parker Palmer wrote in his own way about calling as a joining of joy and service to the world:

For me the heart of the spiritual quest is to know “the rapture of being alive”, and to allow that knowledge to transform us into celebrants, advocates, defenders of life wherever we find it.<sup>4</sup>

*Celebrants, yes!* The Westminster Shorter Catechism of the Reformed Church people are asked: “What is the chief end of man?” The answer: “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” That means to enjoy God’s *works* too, as in glorying in the beauty of nature. A horse glorifies God as it runs with the wind. A maple tree glorifies God as it turns its red and orange colors in the Fall. A bird glorifies God as it sings its own song. We glorify God as we exult in life. The second century theologian Irenaus said, “The glory of God is the human person fully alive!” A child glorifies God as it bounds across the yard. We glorify God as we simply love the world God made.

*Advocates, yes!* Everyone needs an advocate. Every child needs an advocate as they go to school.

*Defenders, yes!* There are people and groups of people who need a defender: We can become defenders too!

Here is calling:

We say with Samuel: “Here I am!”

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- 1 Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening For the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 200).
  2. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (N.Y.: A New Directions Book, 1961),31.
  3. May Sarton, “Now I Have Become Myself”, *Selected Poems of May Sarton* (N.Y.: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978),191.
  - 4.Frederick Buechner, “Vocation”, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, (N.Y.: Harper & Row, Publishers,1973), 95.
  5. Parker Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring* (San Fransico: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 8.