

May 15, 2011

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

John 10:1-10

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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God calls you by name. I was first introduced to this notion of call when I was in college and trying to figure out who I wanted to be when I grew up. I had several good ideas—maybe become a Peace Corps volunteer, or a social worker, or even a physical therapist. But the notion of becoming a priest was far from my mind. Many of you know that my father is also an Episcopal priest, and so of course I had several people throughout my teenage years tell me that I should become a priest too, but I was convinced that the only reason that they were saying this was because of my father. Even through college, I had several important adults encouraging me to enter into the discernment process for the priesthood as soon as I graduated. But the problem was that I was not so certain that this was where God was leading me. There was no burning bush, not even a neon sign flashing an arrow to say “Go there.” In fact, I had no sense of a clear direction. Zip. Zero. And so, when I graduated from college I decided to go out to Los Angeles and do an Episcopal based AmeriCorps program out there. It was important to me to go somewhere where no one knew me. Somewhere that would give me the space and freedom I needed to explore more fully who I was and who I wanted to be, and what's more maybe even discover who God was calling me to be. I needed to be far away, some place without all those influential adults, all those powerful voices - a place where no one would intervene or cloud my exploration.

During that year, I was intentional about taking time away each day to spend in prayer and to hopefully be present with God to discern some direction in my life. The first several months were an intense transition for me. I was living with strangers, starting my volunteer work, oh and also taking on voluntary poverty. Life was intense, and so consequently my prayer life was intense. I would sit there each day, praying: “okay God, here I am. Show me the way.” “I'm discerning, I'm discerning...” and nothing. Nothing came to me. It took me a while to realize that I hadn't really opened myself to discerning God's will in my life. What I was really doing was trying to control. I was trying to force God to show me in my timeframe the path that God wanted me to take. Once I finally realized this and released my deathgrip and stopped trying to control my discernment of God's will; and instead focused on the work that was in front of me, I gradually became aware of God's hand nudging me. By the end of the year, I truly felt God calling me to enter discernment for the priesthood.

We use this language of call a lot when talking about clergy. God called so-and-so to the priesthood. God called Geoffrey and John and Chuck and Noelle and me to serve in this parish. But God's call is not reserved solely for clergy. God calls each of us. It is our job, as faithful people of God, to listen and to be aware of God calling us out to work in the world. It is easier probably for clergy to talk about God's call on their life because we live so publicly the religious life. And yet Jesus the great shepherd says “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” God calls each of us by name. Now you may

be thinking: I have no idea how God is acting in my life or even whether God is calling me to action anywhere in my life. Or maybe, like me, you find yourself waiting for the burning bush. If I were paying better attention, I would have realized that God was calling me very early on in my college career, through the human voices of all those important people in my life. But nincompoop that I am, I was waiting for that deep booming ethereal voice, “Elizabeth, you are to be a priest in my church.” But, in my experience, God rarely acts so directly and overtly as a burning bush or a deep booming voice, but God is there. God does act.

God calls us, individually, to action. Sug collect and document the history of this beloved community, so that my people may know who they have been and who they are. Noelle and Elizabeth, start an internship community of young adults at All Saints’. Tim and Beth, call together and mentor parents of young children and create a community of fellowship and support. I could go on and on. There are hundreds of examples of God at work in this parish through each and every one of you. God calls us each in different ways to actions that lead us to grow into the fullness of who we were created by God to be. God leads us to actions of love in our work, with our family, our friends, and even our enemies. And so our hands, our feet, our words serve as agents for God to work in the world, to offer love and forgiveness and peace through you and through me.

A parishioner at my former parish in Chapel Hill, North Carolina was an OB-GYN. He was an incredibly talented doctor in his field and had a very gentle spirit. He took the time to get to know each of his patients and they were each important to him in their own way. And because he was so good in his field, patients with high-risk pregnancies sought him out. He worked very hard, very intensely with each patient, and frequently the outcome was good, the joy of a new life entering our world. But occasionally there were complications that were just too great, and too complicated for his skill alone to heal what was ailing. And when this would happen, he would do the absolute best that he could do for that patient, and then he would call the parish office and ask for prayers or if he had a free moment, come into the church and get down on his knees and say prayers for this family. He would pray for God to guide him and pray for God to hold that woman and her baby in God’s loving hands. That doctor knew that God called him by name to actions of healing and actions of love. Sometimes his prayers were for God to lead him to a new way of thinking about a patient’s case, and sometimes they were for God to intervene with a miracle. Regardless, that doctor knew of God’s presence guiding him in his work, in his life.

We don’t all share that same certainty. It would be wonderful if we did. But today we are reminded that we are beloved by God. In a few minutes we will pray these words with the Rite 13 Celebrants and remember that we are beloved by God, “For you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I will thank you because I am marvelously made. Search me out, O God, and know my heart; and lead me in the way that is everlasting.” God knows each of us intimately, and calls each of us by name. And when we can sit still long enough, and listen with ears that will hear and a heart that is open, we can hear God calling us, guiding us out into the world.

“...the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.”

You know God's voice.

Shhhhh....

Listen! God is calling you.