Callings – Invitations to Reveal

Beloved community: I invite us to be together in a spirit of prayer. Holy Loving Spirit, we offer thanks for the freedom to be gathered for worship today on our live stream and in this space on Wahpekute Dakota land, which has been loved across millennia. **We trust your presence with us this morning as we wonder how you are calling each of us – inviting us to reveal.** We pray all of this in the name of our great teacher, Jesus. Amen.

When we began our current series of reflections on callings as invitations from God's Spirit, I shared this statement that struck a chord with me when working in camping and retreat ministry in my early 20s and continues to resonate today: When it comes to discerning and responding to God's call in our lives, it can be as much about our availability as it is about our ability. Indeed, both availability and ability were central in the lessons Moses and Saul have taught us about responding to God's invitations.

Moses reminded us that a calling can kindle inside us for a while, waiting to surface to our attention through what I call a "holy interruption." **We considered Moses's call story as an invitation to trust.** Moving through the wilderness with his flock of sheep, Moses did not resist the holy interruption of a bush appearing to be on fire. *"I must turn aside and look,"* Moses said. He chose to watch, listen, become available. Recognizing his own ability was a tougher sell for God's Spirit. *"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"* Leaning into the startling holy interruption, Moses came to understand that the wounds and challenges of his life had uniquely prepared him to **trust** that he could respond to God's call.

He would be able to lead his people out of enslavement – not perfectly, but powerfully – with tenderness and courage.

And then Saul reminded us that a holy interruption by God's Spirit can swoop in on the winds of change. **We considered Saul's call story an invitation to transform.** At the time, Saul was not available to serve as an evangelist (a voice for Jesus' edgy take on God's all-inclusive love and justice). He was utterly unavailable – enmeshed in efforts to silence the Jesus movement. Saul needed to be blinded by light he hadn't previously faced and brought down to his knees by the voice of Jesus asking, "why?" *"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"* The element of ability in Saul's call story was an ability to change – to make a major shift in perspective, attitude, and behavior. In calling Saul to transform, God invited him (and us) to be humbled and softened so that we can move in new directions – not perfectly, but powerfully – with tenderness and courage.

Today, we enter into one more story to further expand our understanding of callings. Cheri offered the backstory that led to the boy Samuel sleeping in the Temple near the ark of God – the physical object that represented God's presence among the people. The narrative backstory of Hannah dedicating her son Samuel to the priestly work of conducting worship in the temple helps us understand how Samuel would have been available – prepared to hold his senses open to the movements of God's Spirit.

The historical context helps us understand how Samuel may have been uniquely able to respond to God's invitation to reveal that which needs to be expressed.

Hebrew scriptures present Samuel as the last of the judges of Israel. Archaeologists and historians do not find evidence that nomadic Hebrew people would have been centralized under the leadership of a single judge as scripture presents. Traditionally, Jews and Christians have understood 1200 to 1000 BCE to be the "Period of the Judges." That time frame coincides with the historical rise and reign of king David over the united kingdom of Israel and Judah for approximately 40 years around 1000 BCE. In scripture, judges lead in varied ways – military leadership, judicial arbitration, and spiritual leadership. They were sort of mix between priest and king. According to scriptural mythology, Samuel (the last judge of Israel) anointed Saul to be the first king of Israel and David to be his successor.

Suffice it to say: biblical judges stewarded immense trust placed upon them by their people. Writers who contributed to our biblical cannon utilized the literary device of a stock character – the judge – to represent how the people longed for someone to express wisdom among their military, judicial, and spiritual leaders. **In our present-day society, we long and pray for wisdom in our leaders in those military, judicial and spiritual arenas** – which we tend to keep quite separated.

Samuel was depicted in scripture not only as a judge but also as a prophet – one who received visions from God and interpreted them to the people. In the story we heard this morning, the Spirit of God brought young Samuel's awareness to the reality that his mentor, the priest Eli's sons had been brazenly harming the people through stealing, sexual abuse, and blasphemy (which was in the form of disregard for the priestly acts of ritual sacrifice).

And the Spirit of God led Samuel to know that Hophni and Phinehas were cruising through corruption and harm of others toward causing themselves pain and eventual devastation.

Hear again this moment in this narrative that has stayed with me and worked within my spirit: *"Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli."*

Laying there a long while in the stillness with that terrible vision was a critical component in Samuel preparing to reveal the vision to Eli in a way that was truthful and caring. I was struck when we sang together this morning in the hymn "Called as Partners in Christ's Service" the phrase, "words of challenge said with care."

I'd like to share with you a poignant story from my younger years which I shared with our Connecting With The Word group this past Wednesday. I was approximately twenty years old when I was driving home from college for Thanksgiving weekend. My sister was in the vehicle as was my college roommate. And one of my grandmothers was riding next to me. I must have been overwrought and irritable because I felt myself getting really annoyed as she commented on my driving – that I was speeding. And I said, "Well Grandma, what can I tell you? Our parents taught us to drive seven over, so that's what I'm doing." And Then it kind of just built from there. I was feeling annoyed. And then she began to make comments to me (her 20-year old granddaughter) that were very critical and very pointed about one of my parents. "I just wish…" and "If only that person would…"

And I was annoyed enough that I did not take any sort of stillness or pause, kept driving, probably glanced her way briefly, and I said, "Grandma, do you have any idea how mean you are?" And so, this was coming from feeling – deep feeling and resentment built up. And it felt true, but it was definitely not said with care.

In our contemplative reading for today, Kate Lore in her poem "What are We So Afraid of?" wrote about the rigor of confrontation. And I'll share a few passages with you again:

"To sit across from someone
and let the words
come plainly:
This is what I think.
This is how I feel.
This is where
we are not the same."

I can only imagine how I could have improved what I articulated to my grandmother if I had been more centered in what I was actually feeling and in wanting her to know what I was feeling and thinking. I failed. That's what we confess.

With whom in your life do you need to practice speaking more plainly – more plainly your feelings and thoughts so that you can truly honor your differences?

I also appreciate how Kate Lore described "real conversation":

"real conversation
asks something of us.

It asks us to risk
being misunderstood.
To hear something
we may not want to hear.
To discover
we were wrong.
To say,
You hurt me.
Or,
I disagree.
There is no community
without friction."

At the time of my grandmother's death – the one of whom I have spoken before – about singing to her every time I would visit from age seven through my mid 20's – at the time of her death, one of my parents had the grace to call my relationship wither her gritty. So if "*there is no community without friction,"* maybe there is no community without grit. And my grandmother had a spacious enough spirit to not turn away from me in the seven or so years that remained of our time together on this Earth.

I want to close with words of blessing from Kate Lore. You may wish to close your eyes or hold them open. Hear these words coming to you:

"[W]hen we bring our words
to the person
who needs to hear them,

and trust that something
stronger than politeness
might hold us:
respect.
curiosity.
love.
And perhaps
the fragile,
necessary hope
that truth spoken
face to face
does not have to
tear us apart.
It might be
how we finally
learn to belong
to one another."

Friends: May we accept God's invitation – God's Spirit's call to courage to reveal truth to others with deep and generous care. God's Love is counting on us. Amen.

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1 Samuel 3:1-21, "What Are We So Afraid Of?"