Today is a notable day in the life of Westminster. This morning we will ordain and install our new church officers who will seek to be faithful to God as they serve our family of faith for the next three years. A few months back, members of our Church Nominating Committee contacted these individuals and asked them to consider serving as a ruling elder, deacon or trustee. Some knew immediately that they had to say “Yes.” A whisper inside had been urging them to find the right spot to use their gifts to further the cause of Christ. When the call came, they believed this was the role to which the whispers of God had been leading them. Others needed time to think about the request. The call caught them off guard and they needed to ponder their situation, to consider what specifically was being asked of them and if this was where God wanted them to serve at this moment in their lives.

As far as I know, none of them was knocked to the ground by a blinding light, none had a vision of a burning bush and none heard the literal voice of God. Yet by answering a telephone call from a fellow member and pondering what was being asked of them and praying about their decision, they detected what they believed to be God’s voice, God’s nudge, God’s challenge.

This day provides, not only for those preparing to enter church office but all of us, the opportunity to reflect on what God is calling us to do and where God is calling us to go. Each of us is a unique human being created in the image of God. Each of us possesses particular gifts and each of us lives in a particular context. The divine call is tailored to fit who we can become and what adventure we can attempt given our particular situation.

How can we discern the call of God? How do we know it is God influencing us and not simply a passing fad of our culture? How can we distinguish between God’s whispers and those of our self-serving ego?

This morning’s passage from the Book of Isaiah provides some pointers that can help. To set the scene, we must go back to the year 525 BCE. After living for decades as exiles in Babylon, the Hebrew people have dragged themselves back to their ransacked homes. They have begun to rebuild their communities and rebuild their lives, but God seems strangely absent.

The people are becoming frustrated with God, because they believe God should be helping them. They believe God should be pleased with them because they are so devoted to worshiping God by fasting and performing rituals of penitence. These acts of devotion were not only thought to be pleasing to God, but were thought to be methods of gaining God’s favor. They believed that if there were a drought, the people would fast and God would bring rain. If there were a battle, the people would fast and God would secure their victory.
Yet, what they believe to be their faithful devotion, their proper worship, God dismisses as little more than window dressing. They act as if God should be pleased with their fasting, penitence and prayers, but not only is God not pleased by their religious rituals, God is outraged that they would even entertain such an idea.

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God says, “Shout out, do not hold back!” Tell them that for worship to be faithful and true, you must “loose the bonds of injustice…let the oppressed go free…share your bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into your house…clothe the naked.”

It is quite simple. God is not the least bit moved by our acts of devotion if we are mistreating our neighbor. Our worship is empty if it does not ignite within us a concern for those who are hurting. If our prayers, hymns and sermon only address me and my concerns – if our worship does not also create empathy for others – then it is little more than babble in God’s ears.

One hundred and fifty years prior to Isaiah, God spoke similar words through the prophet Amos. God said, “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of your fatted animals, I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:21-24)

Both Isaiah and Amos seize upon a word they want to seer into the minds of the people. The Hebrew word is sedeq. It is usually translated righteousness or justice. It means to do what is right. A friend and colleague spells it out beautifully when he says, “Sedeq is concerned both with one guy on the corner who is hungry and homeless, and with a whole city-wide system for housing the poor. Sedeq is concerned with one woman who needs a job and with a whole system of paying people a living wage so that they can afford housing and food and child-care. Did you know that John Calvin worked on a living wage campaign in Geneva so that the working poor in his city would have food and shelter? Sedeq wants to teach one child how to read and it wants a school system that blesses all the children. Sedeq is (focused on) the common good.”

Doing what is right. Doing what is fair. Doing what is just.

If our worship prompts us to compartmentalize our faith so that we think in terms of our religious life happening only on Sunday mornings, but does not include pricking our conscience about people who are hungry, homeless or suffering from oppressive governments, then we are deceiving ourselves if we think we are drawing closer to God. If our religious life is only a balm to heal my personal wounds, only a cleansing of my feelings of guilt, and only a lifting of my spirit; if my religious life is only about God and me, we fracture our relationship with God – not to mention our ties with each other.

Feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless and liberating people who are being treated unjustly puts us in sync with God. This is what God says through the prophets and this is what Jesus meant when he said, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” (Matthew 25:35-36)

A woman from the United States was so impressed with the work of Mother Teresa, she flew to India and tracked her down in the slums of Calcutta. When she finally met the diminutive nun, the woman pulled out her checkbook and said, “I want to write you a check to support your amazing work.”

Mother Teresa looked up at the woman, shook her head and said, “No money.”

“What do you mean, no money? I have a lot of money, this money can help you.”
“No money,” Mother Teresa replied.

“If you won’t take my money, then what can I do?”

Mother Teresa smiled and took her by the hand, and said, “Come and see.”

She led the woman deep into the barrios of Calcutta, searching, until finally she came upon a little girl who was filthy. Mother Teresa said, “Take care of her.”

So the woman took a cloth, and bathed the little girl. She took a spoon and fed her. Later, this woman reported that her life was forever changed.

Mother Teresa gave a speech in New York, in which she said, “You do not need to go to Calcutta to share in my work. Calcutta is wherever you are. Wherever you are, there are people who hurt, people who need love. Find them. Care for them. For in loving them, you love Jesus.”

We know she is right. In the U.S., people with mental illness walk our city streets by day and huddle under overpasses by night. The working poor are not paid a living wage and struggle to keep up with their bills. Predatory lenders charge 300% interest. People of color are trailed by suspicious employees as they walk through a department store. The budgets of city schools are sliced and test scores plummet. Drugs and guns ravage whole sections of town and rob children of productive lives.

How can we discern the call of God? It is not always easy to see beyond our self-preserving egos and to untangle the temptation to look the other way or leave it to someone else. But we can be confident that God’s call will include caring for the frail and the fragile, the misguided and the mistreated, the hardened and the hopeless.

God calls us not only to return love to those who love us, but also to love those who are very difficult to love.

May God give us the will and may we generate the determination to give it our best effort from this day forward.

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