

SOMEONE IS CALLING YOUR NAME

(11/17/19)

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 43:1-3
Genesis 6:5-14
John 10:1-18

“I have called you by name, you are mine.” (Isaiah 43:1)

Several weeks ago, we celebrated the Sacrament of Infant Baptism during our Sunday morning worship service. We then explored Jesus’ teaching that unless we become like little children, we cannot enter or experience the kingdom of heaven.

What is it about little children that fascinates us, that draws us to them? I think it is more than a longing to be young again. Actually, most of us would not want to wake up tomorrow morning, like a character in a Kafka short story, to discover that we are once again six months old, or two years old, or entering first grade. I don’t think we want to be babies or children; we want something they have. This “something” that they have is very important; it may be the key to experiencing the kingdom of heaven which is the primary focus of Jesus’ teaching.

What is it that little children have, that they have in spades, but which we adults may have lost or have lost touch with along the way? Little children are innocent. They are trusting. They are vulnerable. They are dependent. They freely, wholeheartedly express the love that they feel so deeply.

Little children are curious; they ask questions. They like to explore. As soon as they can, they crawl; then they toddle; then they walk. They engage in what Jean Piaget called sensory-motor learning. They motor around as best they can and learn from their senses: what they see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. This is why parents can’t leave things laying around that the child shouldn’t be putting in his/her mouth.

Little children manifest a sense of joy, of delight. We noted the example of the “wow-child,” the young boy who attended a performance of the Boston Symphony Orchestra with his grandfather. At the end of one of the movements of a piece by Mozart, while the audience sat in complete silence (which is what we are taught to do at the end of a movement, to save our applause until the end), the young boy spontaneously exclaimed “Wow!” This spontaneous expression of delight delighted the conductor, the orchestra, and everyone in attendance. The orchestra later rewarded him by holding a special concert for his grandfather and him.

Little children are color-blind; they are able to accept others as they are. They are not prejudiced; we have to teach them that (and, I have to admit, we do a darned good job of it!). This is why I was a strong proponent of school busing back in the 1960s. I thought that if a child went to school with little Caucasian kids, little African-American kids, little Latino kids, and little Asian kids at an early-enough age, and if the child became friends with little kids of different racial, ethnic, and religious groups, then there would be something inside that child that would react later on in life when his/her parents or some other adult tried to implant a prejudice in his/her mind. The child would know from his/her own experience that the prejudice is not true and that it is not helpful to view people who are different in this way. I thought that this is how we could build a better, a non-prejudiced society.

I admit to being naïve. I may have been correct, but such a program of social engineering was determined not to be economically feasible. An additional problem was that parents who were already stuck in their prejudices, and who had moved to different parts of the city or who had moved out of the city so their children wouldn't have to be exposed to children of a different color or ethnicity, simply wouldn't allow their children to be bused to schools in the service of a diverse, multi-ethnic, interracial educational experience. Silly me!

I didn't mention it several weeks ago, but it occurred to me later that little children are also happy with little. When I was a child, all I needed to be happy was my father's Navy knife, my belt hatchet, my bow & hunting arrows or my .22 rifle, and woods that extended from the end of my street to God-knows-where. I was happy exploring the woods, just riding my bike around town, and playing baseball or football with the 15-20 kids in my neighborhood. Looking back, I guess we didn't have much money. I think we were probably lower middle-class socioeconomically. I didn't even have a computer. Ask me if I cared. Nowadays I would really like a new BMW 7 series, or, to be more politically correct and environmentally sensitive, a new Tesla Model S sedan. (I wasn't really hinting about a raise, but even if I were, I can see various members of the Board of Trustees silently mouthing "In your dreams!")

One other salient characteristic came to mind after the baptism service. Little children are resilient. Watch a toddler. They toddle around, exploring the world that surrounds them. Then they tip over; they take a tumble. They may shed a tear or two; they may even reach out for a hug. But they get right back up and set out again. I think we could learn a lot from children in relation to our own response to adversity.

The week following the baptism, we continued our exploration of probably the most important characteristic of children, at least from a spiritual perspective. Little children believe in magic, in mystery. They have little imaginary friends—who are very real to them. I remember when Corey, our first-born, was about four years old. Darlene and I had to set a place at the table every night for Corey's little friend, whose name was Douga. We also had to set a bowl of water on the floor for Douga's little dog, whose name was Bonesy. This went on for some time—for months, as I recall. I still can feel that sadness that Darlene and I felt that day when Corey asked us who the extra place setting and the bowl on the floor were for. His little imaginary friends were gone, never to return; in Wordsworth's words, they "faded away in the light of day."

Children have a sense of the transcendent, that world from which we came before we were born, to which we will return after we die, and which we carry with us and within us throughout our life. They have (at least) one foot in this other realm. They instinctively know that there is something beyond or above or behind the range of normal or merely physical experience, something so special that it is beyond the range of human understanding. When they go to Sunday school or church, they find not only affirmation of this transcendence; they learn stories that give them, that give us, adults and children, little hints regarding the nature of this Divinity. Even more than hints, our worship, our prayer, the moments we are touched with the beauty of nature, or the amazing experience of love give us glimpses of the Divine, our true source, our true spiritual home.

How do we experience this transcendent presence in our lives? In prayer and worship, as we have noted, we reach out to God. However, we should never lose sight of the fact that, long before we reach out to God, God reaches out to us.

In our scripture lesson this morning, God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, tells us, "I have called you by name, you are mine." *I have called you by name.* This tells us that God, the transcendent God who brought the whole universe into being and who continues to create it, who brought us into being and who continues to create us, who continues to guide the unfolding of our life, knows each and every one of us *by name*. This God knows us and loves us with an intimacy that is both comforting and also a little scary. I'm not sure I always want to be known this intimately, this fully by God. Certainly not in what I consider to be less-than-my-shining moments, which, truth-be-told, are more than moments.

Over the next few months, I would like to explore the theme of what it means to be called by God. We will begin by looking at several examples of God speaking to individuals, of calling them by name in the Bible. He did this with Abraham, with Noah, with Moses, with Jacob, with Samuel, with Jesus, and with Saul. These people, these individuals actually *heard* God call them by name. In these moments, these religious experiences, they experienced something or someone breaking into their ordinary, everyday world, the world of space and time. And this experience of being called by God radically changed their lives.

I have heard God call my name; I have actually heard it. This has almost always happened while I was asleep. Perhaps it was in the context of a dream, a dream that I can't remember. But I have heard a voice loudly and distinctly call me by name. The voice was so clear, so strong that in every single case it woke me up. I sat bolt upright in bed and looked around the room to see who it was that called me. In every single case I almost immediately realized that it was not the presence of another person in our house, in our bedroom. I also knew without question that it was God who had called me.

The problem is that I didn't know what it was that God wanted. What was it that God wanted to say to me—either in my dream or after God's "voice" had awakened me? This was never clear. Just this past week, when I was thinking about this, I came to the conclusion that maybe the calling of my name was not the *prelude* to a message, a lesson, a teaching. Perhaps it was just *the experience* of being called, an experience of God reaching out to touch me, to draw me back into that world, that magical heavenly realm which so often slips away from me in the course of my daily life.

I'm curious. How many of you have ever had this experience—either while you were asleep, in a dream, or when you were alone in a room? Please raise your hands. It is a strange experience, a moving experience, an experience of what the theologian Rudolf Otto called the *mysterium tremendum*, the powerful sacred mystery that is at the center of not only my life but the entire universe. Perhaps God is simply calling us back to our true center. Perhaps God is calling us to change in some way. The first, the most important thing we can do is simply listen.

Several weeks ago, in our Tuesday afternoon study group, I asked how many of us had ever had the experience of being awakened from sleep by the sound of someone calling our name. Approximately half of the group members had had this experience. Two others had heard

a voice calling their name while they were awake. As I mentioned, I am not sure what this is all about, but I do know it happens and that, when it happens, we experience it as meaningful.

Many, many years ago, God called a man named Noah. Noah is described in the Book of Genesis as “a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God.” God told Noah to do something that no one else had ever done, certainly not in that part of the world. God told Noah to build an ark. God’s judgment on the sin of humanity took the form of a destructive flood; God’s mercy was shown in saving a remnant, the seed of a new beginning. And Noah did as this strange voice commanded. He did this because he had faith. He did this because he trusted the voice.

I believe that, like Noah, God is calling each of us to build something. He is probably not calling us to build an ark, though, with climate change, even people inland might someday need to do this. The people in Venice have discovered that they are already behind the eight ball. God is calling us to build something that will save not only us, but that will also save humanity. I believe that what we are called to build will not be made of wood. It will be built of the kind of values that we bring to bear in our own life and that we bring to bear on the problems with which we struggle as a nation and as a world. And perhaps the ark, the container that will help us ride out the storms of life, is the church. I like to think so. I hope so.

I believe that God is calling each and every one of us. God, through Jesus, is calling us back to our true home, our true spiritual center. God is reaching out to us in the darkness, hoping that we will stretch out *our* hand in response. What I find comforting is that, in those moments when I experience God calling me, he does not say, “Hey you!” He actually calls me by name. Jesus tells us that the Good Shepherd knows each and every sheep. Each sheep has a name. This is the kind of relationship that God has with us.

In the words of our closing hymn, *Jesus Is Tenderly Calling Thee Home*, written by Fanny Crosby in the late nineteenth century, God in Jesus is calling us, is calling us by name. Jesus calls us back to “the sunshine of love” from which we have roamed. Jesus calls us, the weary, to rest, to share our burdens with him. The hymn ends by telling us that Jesus is waiting, is waiting for us to respond to his call. In fact, he is pleading. All we have to do is respond, just as Noah did, just as the disciples did of old.

Someone is calling your name. Someone is calling you into a new life, into a fullness of life. Someone is calling you home, home to your true center. I believe that someone is God. When we hear God's call, I hope that we, like Noah, will respond to the call with faith.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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