

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

January 18, 2009

1 Samuel 3: 1-10 (11-20); Psalm 139: 1-5, 12-17; John 1: 43-51

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“You have searched me out and known me....” With these words the Psalmist expresses the deepest longings of each of us: to be known, individually and intimately. And in Psalm 139 we are reminded of the joy of being known and loved by God: “you have known my sitting down and my rising up.... You are acquainted with all my ways.” Especially in difficult times, these words are comfort food.

This longing to be known, to be in an intimate relationship with God actually fulfills God’s dream for humanity. From the beginning, we were meant not to be alone, but to reflect and participate in the divine relationship of personhood revealed in what we now call the Trinity: between Creator and Redeemer and Life Sustainer. We were made to have human relationships that flourish and multiply God’s blessings in the world. And so, naturally, the relationship we long for with God is often found through other people.

Ubuntu is the South African word that has become known worldwide primarily through the work of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Difficult to define precisely in Western terms, *ubuntu* focuses on the importance of relationships in defining who we are and in giving our lives their ultimate meaning. Simply put, it can mean “a person is a person through other persons.” How we live in relationship to others defines, shapes and gives meaning to who we are. In the words of Archbishop Tutu: “It is to say, ‘My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.’” (*No Future without Forgiveness*, p. 31)

Ubuntu theology is most frequently associated with the work of forgiveness and reconciliation between oppressed and oppressor, as in the conditions created under apartheid in South Africa. But truly, it goes deeper, right to the heart of discipleship in its reliance upon human interconnectedness. In *ubuntu*, we are dependent upon others to become fully ourselves.

The Old Testament reading today is the familiar story of the call of Samuel. On the surface, it seems that Samuel is a naïve young boy who, eventually, with a little coaching from his elderly mentor, gets it that it's God calling. Especially if we come into this reading with no history of Eli the priest, we have little sense of him other than as an old man, washed up and about to be punished for failing to get his own house in order. If, however, we know the full story of how Samuel came to be with Eli, we know that theirs was a significant relationship in which Eli raised Samuel and prepared him for his future call. Even now, it's Eli who tells Samuel who is really calling him. It's Eli who tells him how to respond. And it's Eli who graciously asks about and accepts the shift of God's favor from himself to Samuel. Without Eli, Samuel would not have been prepared for, and might have missed altogether, the call into his new life as a prophet of God.

In the reading from John's Gospel today, Jesus continues the call of his disciples, another example of the power of relationship in bringing people to God. In this version of the call of the first disciples, it's John the Baptist who points out Jesus to two of his own followers, one of whom is Andrew, who later brings his own brother Simon Peter. Next, Jesus calls Philip, who in turn brings Nathanael. Initially a skeptic ("Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"), after just one encounter, Nathanael proclaims Jesus Son of God and King of Israel.

Nathanael's remarkable conversion, from cynic to believer, dramatizes the powerful result of an encounter with Jesus Christ. "Come and see," Philip said to Nathanael. No arm-twisting, cajoling, guilt trips or media frenzy. Simply an invitation to come see for himself, to experience the One who could only be experienced to be understood. From these earliest moments in describing Jesus' ministry, John emphasizes not preaching, not teaching, not miracles, but personal encounter and relationship with the Son of God, the Messiah, as the way to know him.

And so in both texts we are confronted with the notion that God's call to us may not be a direct, one-on-one exchange but one mediated through others. For Samuel, it was his mentor. For Nathanael, it was his

friend. And last Sunday we witnessed the baptisms here of an adult and several children, none of whom just showed up on their own. They were brought to their encounter with Jesus by parents, family and friends. And that is what we do as the Body of Christ – we bring others.

The only thing more stunning than the news reports of the airplane landing safely on the Hudson River this past Thursday was watching the Coast Guard video of the plane's descent and the passengers standing on the wings of the airplane that had become a boat. From the distance, with only the nose of the plane visible, they looked to be standing on top of the water, recalling another miracle in our Christian tradition. As individual stories of survivors appear in the news, the common thread in the miracle is this: while some wept, some screamed, some prayed, once they hit the water and lived, they became an intentional community, from strangers on a plane to survivors with a shared memory, a shared story. And during those minutes that felt like years, they literally held on to each other as they waited, amazed that rescue was even an option.

Most of us will never experience such trauma nor blatant miracle. Most of us live our lives just trying to get by, trying to be good, to stay out of the cold, keep our bills paid and our families in tact. But routine can dull us to the quickening presence of God, trying to get into our lives, a God who is always calling us beyond our self-imposed and self-possessed boundaries.

Because being a Christian is not about staying here all together, miraculous survivors on the wings of a downed plane. It's about going out to new places and bringing people back. Going to spread the Good News and to be enlightened and transformed by others' understanding of the Good News. We are meant to be in community, but we are not meant to stand still or to die in place. We are meant for ever-expanding relationships, weaving our stories in and among others stories, sharing our suffering and our hope as we humbly incarnate the body of Christ. In the words of Joan Chittister: "No one becomes holy alone. Only constant, stable contact with others gives us the self-knowledge it takes to become what God wants us to be." (*Listen with the Heart*, p. 69)

To know that we are each beloved children of God, searched out and known by our Creator, is essential to our deepest spiritual longings. But the rest of the story of our lives as Christians is found in our *ubuntu*, our interconnectedness through Christ Jesus.

And now as I prepare to take my leave of you, it's a good time for all of us to remember this interconnectedness and the enduring bond that makes us who we are. You have contributed to my formation as I have to yours. Together, we have explored what it means to be Christians in this time and place. We have confessed our failures and mistakes together. We have been forgiven and fed and strengthened together. And we have been blessings to one another.

I am who I am because of you; and when I leave, I will take those parts that we shared with me and leave them with you as well. We are meant for relationship but not meant to stand still.

So go out and invite others. Bring them here so that they, too, can be part of our continuing story. For as the Body of Christ, nothing can separate us from the love of God nor from one another.

Come and see. Bring others and come and see. Amen