

Congregational Church of Pinehurst
United Church of Christ
October 18, 2015
Pentecost21B

Exodus 3:1-14
Mark 10:35-45

Servants Unwrapped

As I read the Hebrew and Gospel readings this week,
I found myself thinking about parenting styles.
In previous generations, as the cliché goes,
“children were to be seen and not heard”.
Praising a child too much
might lead to an over-inflated sense of self.
But it could also leave a child feeling a bit inadequate.

On the other hand, parents of my generation
have been accused of offering their children
too much praise.
So much so, it is said,
that we have left our children
unable to cope with challenge and failure in life.
We are so afraid that they will feel inadequate
that we fix everything for them,
before they have the chance
to learn to take care of themselves.

Well, I’m certainly no expert,
But it seems to me that whatever the generation,
parenting is a very tough job.
It’s a hard balance to achieve and there are no perfect parents.
But I believe that the vast majority of parents,
sincerely try to raise their children as best they can,
given the stresses that they face.

So what does parenting style have to do with Moses
and James and John in today's scripture stories?

Well, there could not be a much greater contrast
to the call to serve

than in the reaction of Moses
and in the reaction of James and John
in these two stories.

Despite being raised as royalty,

Moses immediately jumps to feeling inadequate,
"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?"

And James and John immediately go to bravado,
"We are able!"

And that's especially surprising,

Since Jesus has just been talking about the risks involved
in the commitment to serve.

I mean, able or not, who would want that?

But they don't seem to get it.

Maybe that's why they are called the 'duh-ciples'.

Or maybe Moses had overly-strict parents,

and James and John had overly lenient ones.

Or maybe I should leave blaming the parents to Freud.

After all, maybe life's circumstances shaped them that way.

Or maybe that's just the personalities they were born with!

But as I thought about it, either approach has its problems.

Because either feeling inadequate or full of bravado,
in some ways comes to the same thing---
the focus is on me.

Either I'm not adequate or I'm overqualified!

But in each story,

we are pushed to see that the world is bigger than that!

God reminds Moses

that there are oppressed people in the world
and God needs help doing something about it.

Jesus reminds James and John
That whoever wants to be great
must be a servant to all,
especially to those who have the least power in this world.

William Sloan Coffin, Jr.,
one of the great prophetic preachers of the last century,
once said that “there is no smaller package in the world
than a person who is all wrapped up
in himself or herself.”

And when you think about it,
that can be true not only of the self-important person,
but also of the person who feels perennially inadequate.
Because the life of service that the Divine Spirit calls us to
is not ultimately about who **we** are,
but about who it is that needs our hands and heart.

And it is about the God of the Hebrews,
and the God of Jesus,
who continually reminds us
that the Divine life will be with us and in us
whoever we are and wherever we go.

God calls those who feel inadequate,
and those who feel self-important,
and those who vacillate between the two.

Why?

Because that’s what God’s got to work with!
Imperfect people with imperfect lives,
who struggle to get up in the morning,
and to be humble,
and to be strong,
and to be meek,
and to be themselves.

And God seems just fine with that.

God is patient with Moses.

Jesus is patient with James and John.

And, perhaps the key to becoming
a faithful servant minister in the world,
is to be patient with ourselves.
We don't have to wait until we can feel completely adequate
or appropriately humble
in order to put ourselves into the hands
of the God who loves us just as we are
and to open ourselves to serving the people God loves.
That's the only way to get beyond ourselves,
and connected to others in ways that will heal the world.

I've seen plenty of church signs that read something like,
"Believe in Jesus and be saved
that **you** might have eternal life in heaven."

But recently I saw a bumper sticker that read,
"Be the Church:
Feed the hungry
Clothe the poor
Fight for justice
Free the oppressed
Love you neighbor.

I was pleased to see in small letters
in the corner of that bumper sticker the words---
The United Church of Christ

At our best,
we are God's inadequate, self-important, brave, fearful,
"duh-ciples" seeking to be disciples.
Knowing that getting wrapped up in ourselves,
only blocks us from serving others effectively,
and keeps us from becoming the fully alive people
that God intends us to be---
not servants wrapped up in ourselves,
but servants unwrapped
and on fire for the common good.

If you are not there yet, you have lots of company.
The life of servant ministry is a life-long journey.
So be patient---
not with poverty and injustice and discrimination---
but with yourself.

In seminary, as part of a class assignment,
I spent a little time volunteering at the Open Door in Atlanta.
The Open Door was a transitional home
for some of Atlanta's poorest citizens
who were facing desperate times.

In this renovated old three story home at the edge of downtown,
the homeless could find a warm meal and a place to sleep,
for extended periods of time.

I remember being there one cold day.

There was a knock at the door,
and an older gentleman appeared needing a place to stay.

Because the Open Door was full,
the person in charge that day
was getting information and making arrangements
to get this gentleman to another nearby shelter.

In the meantime, Jimmy, one of the current residents
appeared with a new pair of shoes.

Jimmy had noticed that this older gentleman's shoes
were worn through at the soles

and were not adequate for such a cold day.

I knew Jimmy only had two pairs of shoes to begin with,
so afterwards I asked Jimmy why he'd given away
one of the two pair of shoes he had to his name.

Jimmy simply smiled and replied,

"I can only wear one pair at a time."

I still remember that story,
When I am struggling to get out of focusing on myself
and be a servant minister to others.
It is indeed a life-long journey.
But thank God there are surprising teachers along the way.

In his story about Moses,
Rabbi Marc Gellman speculates that “patience”
was the most important quality God was looking for
in a servant leader for the Hebrew people---
someone who took the time to notice
what was right in front of him---
somebody who would not give up,
no matter how badly things looked.

As Gellman tells the story.....

*Moses...saw the [burning] bush
and sat down on the ground and watched.*

*Moses watched and watched
and saw that the bushes leaves were burned off
and the bushes branches were black,
just like an ordinary burning bush.*

*The only thing different about this burning bush
Was that it did not burn up.....*

And Moses was the only one who waited long enough to notice.

*Moses tried to get the other shepherds to come over
and watch the bush with him,
but they all had better things to do.*

*Moses also had better things to do,
but he did not know it at the time.¹*

So friends, we all have our strengths and growing edges,
But perhaps the important thing
 is to be patient enough with ourselves,
 that we can stop our anxious navel-gazing,
 and being so wrapped up in ourselves,
and gaze instead at the bush burning right in front of us.
 To notice what is on fire in God's world.
 To notice what is calling us to move out of ourselves
 and into action---
 to love,
 to act with compassion,
 to seek justice
 and to spread extravagant joy---
To be God's servants unwrapped,
 and ready to wrap the world in God's love.

Amen.

Rev. Brent A. Bissette

¹From "Watching the Burning Bush", a story by Rabbi Marc Gellman, in his book Does God Have a Big Toe?, HarperCollins*Publishers*, 1989, pp. 70-71.