

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
July 7, 2024 – The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 6:1-13
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

There are times as I read the Gospel accounts of Jesus and his followers that I envy the women and men who knew Jesus. Can you imagine what it must have been like to hear Jesus speak, to witness him healing the sick, to see his face and look into his eyes? My envy in reading today's lesson is practical – what would it have been like to have Jesus give me (and us) a clear assignment and the power to carry it out successfully? Jesus told his twelve closest followers where to travel and with whom, what to do, and even what to wear – and they did just what he said!

For most of us that's not how the life of following Jesus goes. The instructions are often vague. We sometimes hit roadblocks on our way or find ourselves taking a long detour or even falling in a ditch. We may arrive at our destination, do our assignment, and then get a different one. And off we go to a new destination that appears to be meant for us now, at least we hope so. On our journey we may feel like the Israelites in the wilderness who traveled for forty years and didn't get too far in all that time on the road.

I'm speaking about vocation, the voice of God, of Jesus calling us to lead a way of life that is in line with God's vision for the world and uses the gifts God has given us. We all have a vocation. Everyone here has heard the voice of God or sensed the nudge of God or felt the desire for God somehow and at some time. My thought is that we're all being called by God now. That's why we're here.

Last Sunday was Deacons' Day in our diocese and we had the privilege of hearing our deacon, Mary Elmiger-Jones, speak about her call to the diaconate and her particular call and gift of listening to others with compassion, especially at their times of vulnerability and challenge. Hearing Mary's story inspires us to look at our lives with eyes to see how God has called us and is calling us now.

Before I share some wisdom on the subject of vocation from respected teacher and author, Parker J. Palmer, I'd like to tell you about one thread of my own call story. I'll begin in the middle, in middle age, in fact.

After a number of years when I had no connection to church – but a sincere connection to Jesus – I returned to church because a friend recommended a priest new to my area who was a "good guy." He was, and with enthusiasm I returned to regular worship and participation in church life. This priest became my spiritual director. He introduced me to St. Ignatius' approach of imaginative engagement with scripture. I fell in love with God and wanted to learn more about God and how God works in people's lives.

So, I enrolled in a master's degree program in Christian spirituality at the General Theological Seminary in New York City. The program was open to lay people with no vocation to ordained ministry. I studied the history of Christian spirituality, the contributions of the saints and other "greats" in the history of the church, individual and group spiritual direction, and discernment. I expected to use my background in psychology and spirituality to speak to people about their lives and their faith.

BUT not long into the program a classmate asked me, “have you ever considered ordained ministry?” In spite of my quick and vehement “no!” the seed was planted. I began a 20 month long process that led me to study for a Master of Divinity degree and to my eventual ordination to the priesthood shortly before I turned 55.

What happened to that first call? Had I been mistaken? I don’t think so. In my years as a parish priest I have listened to people and been able to see and speak about God’s presence and action in their lives. Not in a formal spiritual direction relationship, but here and there, with friends and with parishioners.

Last fall I joined the Retreat in Everyday Life offered by the leaders of the Ignatian Spirituality Partnership of Maine. This was an eight month long online program that included daily prayer and monthly group and individual spiritual direction sessions. I knew that retreatants often discerned God’s call to new ministry or a new direction in life by the end of the retreat. At my age I didn’t expect that. BUT a few weeks before the end of the retreat, I found myself drawn, “head and heart” as the Ignatians would say, to the Adelynrood School for Spiritual Direction. I started that program in June and will go back for the second session in August. I returned to where I started more than twenty years ago. That is frequently how the path of vocation unfolds.

I said I would share some wisdom from Quaker teacher and writer, Parker J. Palmer. Of the many books he has written, I would recommend this – “Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation.” The title describes the book well. Palmer tells the story of his life, and how he ventured down many wrong paths before he listened deeply to his life and his own inner truth and finally found the right path, God’s path for him. He shares the wisdom he gained in the process.

Parker writes, “Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God. ... The deepest vocational question is not ‘What ought I to do with my life?’ It is the more elemental and demanding ‘Who am I? What is my nature?’”

In order to answer these questions, we need to listen carefully to the voice within us. The voice may speak in words. It also speaks in other ways. Palmer writes, [Our lives] “speak through our actions and reactions, our intuitions and instincts, our feelings and bodily states of being, perhaps more profoundly than through our words. We are like plants, full of tropisms that draw us toward certain experiences and repel us from others. If we can learn to read our own responses to our own experience – a text we are writing unconsciously every day we spend on earth – we will receive the guidance we need to live more authentic lives.”

As people of faith, we are called to live authentic lives, to honor the gifts God has given us, and to use our gifts for the glory of God, the good of God’s world and people, and ultimately for our joy. Wherever our journey takes us, we will be heading in the right direction if we desire to know God better, to become closer to God, to love God more deeply. The Holy Spirit is within our hearts, calling us to ever greater love. To listen to that call and to follow the path of love is the labor of our hearts and of our lives. In Jesus’ name. Amen.