

St James the Fisherman
3.vi.2018, II Post Pentecost
Milton McC Gatch

Proper 4B: I Sam 3.1-20; II Cor. 4:5-12; Mark 2:23-3:6

When I was a boy, some eighty years ago, I grew up in the Methodist Church in Milford Ohio (population 2,000). The story of the boy Samuel was often told. Born to a woman who had been barren, he was given over as a thank-offering to the prophet Eli —a woman who finally and miraculously gives birth gives the child away! One night while Samuel was living with Eli, God repeatedly wakened him; and the boy, thinking Eli was calling him, went to the prophet, who said, "I didn't call," and sent him back to bed. Finally, Eli says to Samuel that perhaps God was speaking to him, and he should say, "Here I am. What do you want?" And , thus, Samuel learns that he will succeed Eli as the chief prophet of the People. I think the story (a legend, I'd now call it) of God repeatedly waking the boy Samuel was told in Sunday School as a cautionary tale for little boys (and, perhaps, girls): If you are good and listen to what God is saying to you great things can happen.

The tale is, in fact, a calling story. God was reaching out to a person for whom there is to be a special, historic role: in this case, to take up the prophetic/ priestly/ political role of his guardian Eli. But the tale also has its dark side that I do not recall was dwelt on in Sunday School. Samuel is being called to this role because of the shortcomings of Eli and his sons. The sons, themselves priests, had been appropriating offerings and sleeping with temple maidens, and Eli (who was aware of their carryings-on) had not adequately chastised and punished them. And God decreed that Eli's sons would die before their father and could not succeed him as the chief prophet. All of this was part of Samuel's nighttime conversation (vision/ dream) with God. When Eli made Samuel report his communication with God, he was strangely accepting of his fate: "It is the Lord. Let him do what seems good

to him.” (One has to wonder whether Eli would have accepted this decree so calmly.) The writer of the Samuel history was clearly on Samuel’s side, however, and wanted to justify his unusual succession, He accepted his calling and became the leader of the People in his generation.

Is there a moral in this story, as in my Sunday School? I'm not sure. It is a chapter in the history of God’s People, and it involves a young person who accepts his destiny—who is called to a role and accepts it. It is a tale told in retrospect to explain what was yet to happen—everything about the boy Samuel portended greatness in the service of his People and their God.

The difficult little passage that was read from Second Corinthians can also be seen as about accepting a call—of doing as best one can what we perceive we ought to do for ourselves and for humanity—doing God’s will for us, as we say.

Paul speaks of persecutions, of the hardships and difficulties he is undergoing. He is afflicted but not crushed, perplexed but not despairing, persecuted but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed. And this is because he and all followers of Jesus carry *in our bodies* the death of Jesus—his suffering—so that we can show our faith in resurrection, our belief that Christ’s example of love, tolerance, forgiveness, justice, equality is what wins. We “suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” as Hamlet puts it, but we win. “Let light shine out in darkness,” says Paul. God’s light, Jesus’ light, our light in faith.

We are, says Paul, fragile clay pots. If you have been to India, you have probably seen persons sitting by the roadside, selling little cups of chai, milky sweetened tea. The cups are unglazed clay, probably sun-dried and not even bisqued. After one use, they are crushed back into the ground. For Paul we are clay pots: fragile, ordinary, dispensible things. But in our lives

as clay pots God's eternal love can shine out to illuminate and help the world.

The Gospel this morning centers on sabbath observance. Whenever I read about this issue in the New Testament, I remember my maternal grandmother. Once, on a Sunday morning, my mother told Grandma Curry that she was taking her three sons to a movie that afternoon. "What!" she exclaimed, "A movie! On Sunday? In Milford?" (What will the neighbors say?)

In the Mark Gospel, Jesus has debates as a Jew with other Jews, in this case with Pharisees, who were the advocates of strict enforcement of Jewish law. Jesus takes a much more utilitarian view on the subject of observance of religious law and asserts that he has the right to his own interpretation. Once on a Sabbath, the disciples were not only walking a long distance but also harvesting wheat (poaching?) as they went through a field. They were criticized for breaking the law of Shabbas. But Jesus countered (after giving an example of David and his followers breaking a ritual law) that humankind wasn't brought into being just to observe Shabbas; Shabbas was made to give humankind rest, refreshment.

It is the same with the story of the man with a withered hand who is healed on the sabbath. Jesus asserted a new reading of the law, which puts less emphasis on the letter of the law and more on the benefits of law to humankind. The calling of Jesus' followers is not to blind observance but keeps an eye on human needs—on justice and well-being.

I could say many things about religious legalists in our time, but I think that you get the point. The point is that of the prophet Micah: What does god require of us? What is our calling as Christians? To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Amen.