

Third Sunday after Epiphany (3B) – January 25, 2015
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:6-14; I Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Discern Your Call and Giftedness

In our readings today we continue to witness God's call to a variety of people, bridging a 2,500 year span from the time of Jonah to our hearing these stories today. Personally, I can identify more with the way Jonah *reluctantly* responded to his call than with the way Jesus' disciples seemed to *immediately* respond when they were called. Nonetheless, it is important to listen to the voice that is calling. There are all different kinds of voices calling us to all different kinds of action—or distraction, or reaction or inaction. Our challenge is to distinguish the voice of God in the midst of all these voices, including voices that tell us just how limited and inadequate we are. Voices coming at us and voices within us—and we all experience them—have to be evaluated. The more intense and insistent they are, the more essential it is to do this. Voices or messages come from many sources. They can be angelic and creative—or destructive, from a shadow source if you will. We do well if we, like Jonah, are troubled or concerned when something deeply directive wells up within us and we feel called to specific action. When this happens, often we also feel perplexed, unprepared, incapable, unworthy, fearful, reluctant and even annoyed, like Jonah. As with everything else in life, these feelings have a legitimate role. They can act as warning. They can clear our vision to see false notes in a possibility, to see traps, to realize that we are attracted to something that is essentially unwise and harmful. But, on the other hand, these feelings can keep us on the edge of possible action, or worse, immobilize us, as happens along the way with Jonah and with Jesus' disciples, especially when the going got tough.

Yet a common thread in the pattern of God's call found throughout the Bible is that in each person's call there is a fundamental sense of being beloved and blessed and believed in by God, and accepted as one fitted and gifted for a particular task. God's affirmation of the very being of those called, in turn, enables them to recognize their gifts to respond to the call they've heard. And that helps cut through the feelings of fear and inadequacy, and provides the grace to realize and respond to that call. And this is so also with us.

Frederick Buechner describes Jesus' disciples as being called not "because they were brighter or nicer than other people. In fact, the New Testament record suggests that they were continually missing the point, jockeying for position and, when the chips were down, interested in nothing so much as saving their own skins. Their sole qualification seems to have been their initial willingness to rise to their feet when Jesus said, 'Follow me'."ⁱ Yes, and yet here in this gathered community which, of course, is, as Garrison Keillor describes his hometown, "where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average,"—in fact, are very special—even here, I think, we, too, feel as much perplexity, fear, reluctance, and inadequacy as did some of these Biblical figures. Coming to know our own God-given giftedness is not easy. Knowing or not knowing our giftedness affects how we perceive ourselves and how we expand or limit

our interests, and thus how we respond to God who is calling each of us every day. In whatever age or stage we find ourselves, we need to look at this sense of being God-gifted.ⁱⁱ

The truth is this: every human being is endowed with some set of gifts, including inclinations that can become a full-blown competence and ministry. In terms we've heard from our Scriptures—or whether we learned this from our parents or teachers, or from Mr. Rogers or Jesse Jackson, from Martin Luther King, Jr. or Nelson Mandela—we are all, each of us *somebody*. No one is a nobody. So, although we may not see our gifts for what they are; or, having discerned them, we may choose not to accept the gifts for any purpose, and so waste them; or, having claimed our gifts, we may not be willing to do the hard work necessary to nurture them and put them to best use—nonetheless, each of us is a master of something. And part of becoming fully alive is to discover and develop our God-given giftedness.

Discerning our God-given gifts is difficult for many other reasons, too. One reason--as Quaker educator Parker Palmer points out—is that we live in a culture that tells us there is no such thing as a gift, and that we must earn or make or otherwise acquire everything we get. And so we often make the false assumption that our giftedness can be no other than our acquired skills. Another reason is that various social forces such as sexism, classism and ageism, racism or homophobia, among others may press poor self-images upon some of us. Our own inner self-doubt may lead us to continue to embrace those images despite the obvious damage they do. But the most subtle barrier to the discernment of our giftedness is in the gifts themselves. Since our gifts include our memories and experiences, our interests and attitudes, our personality, our values, our energy, and other aspects of ourselves that are so central to us, so integral to who we are, we often take these gifts for granted and are often utterly unaware of the purpose and power and good they give us. Of course, our gifts and our acquired skills can and do overlap – just as Jesus invited fishermen to become fishers of another sort, thus not having them give up their acquired skills entirely.ⁱⁱⁱ

But as Parker Palmer again points out, “the skills we are most aware of possessing are often those we have acquired only through long hours of study and practice, at considerable financial or personal cost. Precisely because these skills once cost us effort to acquire, and still cost us effort to employ, we are acutely aware of owning them. [However,] ironically, these hard-earned skills are often not our leading strengths; if they were, they would not be so effortful.”^{iv} Yet these skills are the strengths upon which we often build our identities and our careers. Meanwhile, our more fundamental gifts either languish unused and unappreciated, or get used unconsciously without being named or claimed or developed further. Yet, even without our conscious realization, each of these more fundamental gifts we have has inherent power and may help us develop our acquired skills, and, in fact, are often essential to the achievement of mastery of our acquired skills—such fundamental gifts include the capacity to wait patiently for insight to emerge; or the capacity to trust in the outcomes of an uncertain process; or the capacity to take risks even under pressure; or the capacity to speak the truth even when it is not what people want to hear.^v

So when we seek to hear God's call and respond with a sense of our giftedness, first it is important not to equate this sense with the techniques our society names as skills. Our gifts may be as simple as a real interest in other people, a ready heart, a generous and compassionate spirit, an eye for beauty, a sense of humor, open-mindedness, a love of rhythm and sound, a zeal for justice, or a hopeful attitude. In those simple personal gifts lies the path forward to listen and respond to the voice of God, if we are willing to do the inner and outer work necessary to identify, claim, develop, and act on them. And, finally, it is important for those who call themselves followers of Christ to be a part of a worshiping, learning, and outreaching community called the Body of Christ—the Church. We need one another to help each member discern, claim, develop, and use his/her gifts. Within the community of faith, we can help evoke, recognize, and affirm not only each other's acquired skills, but also one another's more fundamental gifts.

It is with the help of others here and beyond this parish that we can recognize our gifts and then match our desire to use our gifts with the gifts and needs of God's world around us; and discern what specific work God is calling each of us to do, individually and together as a church to join Christ's mission of repairing the world, and to serve the common good, in all parts of our lives.

ⁱ Frederick Buechner Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), p. 62

ⁱⁱ Coming to know our own God-given giftedness is not easy these days. In my experience more people suffer from a sense of inadequacy than enjoy feelings of capacity and competency about their powers of creativity and caring. This is compounded by our own fears of taking responsibility to act, and by our tendencies to feel jealous at the quality of someone else's skills (especially if that person is more thoroughly trained, or is some kind of "expert").

ⁱⁱⁱ Parker Palmer The Active Life (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), pp. 64-68

^{iv} Palmer, *Ibid.*, p. 66.

^v *Ibid.*, p.67.