

Dr. Paul Tellström
Epiphany 2B MLK Sunday

Irvine United Congregational Church, UCC
January 15, 2012

Hebrew Testament Reading: I Samuel 3:1-20

Gospel Reading: John 1:43-51

word count: 1,533

John W. Gardner, founding chairman of Common Cause, said that it is a privilege to help people understand the difference they can make –not only in their own lives, but also in the lives of others, simply by knowing who they are and by being authentic in answering life’s challenges with integrity. It’s about living life as if it were a calling rather than mere existence.

Gardner tells of a cheerful old man who asked the same question of just about every new acquaintance he fell into conversation with: “Hello. What have *you* done that you believe in and you are proud of?”

He never asked conventional questions such as “What do you do for a living?” It was always, “What have you done that you believe in and are proud of?”

It was an unsettling question for people who had built their self-esteem on their wealth or their family name or their job title.

Not that the old man was a fierce interrogator. He was delighted by a woman who answered, “I’m doing a good job raising three children;” and by a cabinetmaker who said, “I believe in good workmanship and practice it;” and by a woman who said, “I started a bookstore and it’s the best bookstore for miles around.”

“I don’t really care how they answer,” said the old man. “I just want to put the thought into their minds. I want them to listen and know how to respond.”

“They should live their lives in such a way that they can have a good answer. Not a good answer for me, but for themselves. That’s what’s important.”¹

In churches throughout America today we are hearing about being called, and how that calling shines into the darker corners of our national life, our Christian denominational identities, and our personal values.

The Rev. Dr. King personifies a presence both human and symbolic in modern America of how we are informed by our faith and reason, and how those two things can call us to an overwhelming mission. Dr. King’s mission cost him his life and it is still incomplete.

As a young minister, Dr. King must have felt like Samuel, hearing the story of our faith and being caught up in a vision of what it meant to assist in building God’s realm on earth. Like Samuel going to Eli in the morning, Dr. King must have felt fear that what he knew he had to say would not be gladly received in the courts of power.

Yet Eli knew, and we know, that the slow march towards justice will prevail only when we hear its call and rise up to follow it.

Martin Luther King felt that he was put in a place in a special time because God had a use for him. He had wanted a quiet life as a professor. He had earned a Ph.D. at Boston University and hoped to be President of Morehouse College in Atlanta someday.

Owing to a peculiar turn of events, as a young pastor he was thrust into the forefront of the Montgomery bus boycott, and it was in Montgomery that his youth and inexperience was tested. After a contentious series of public meetings and confrontations he came home late one night, tired and frightened. The phone rang. An angry voice on the other end said, “We’re gonna get you!” followed by a racial epithet. Martin Luther King recalled that he stood in his kitchen, frozen in fear, aware that he was jeopardizing not only his own life, but his young

family's as well. He wanted to call his father for reassurance and advice, but his father was not there.

Then he said it was as if he heard a voice there with him in that kitchen. "Martin, you do what's right. You stand up for justice. You be my drum major for righteousness. I will be with you." He had heard his name called. He described a feeling of knowing what God wanted with his life. His life was forever changed and through his life, so was the world.

It was more than personal courage, strong faith and a good education that gave Martin Luther King what he needed to rise above his fear. He listened to what life was truly calling him to do. He was given a vision that was greater than his own. He was able to answer the question, "What have you done that you believe in and are proud of?"

Listening requires not merely open ears, but even more, open hearts. In his book *The Heart of Christianity* Marcus Borg, who will speaking from this pulpit next month with John Dominic Crossan, says,

"When our hearts are closed, we live within a shell. To extend the egg metaphor: the shell needs to be broken open if the life within it is to enter into full life. What we need is the 'hatching of the heart.' And if the heart is not hatched, we die."

Have you and I experienced the hatching of our hearts? Have we taken the risk of listening for the inviting, yet challenging voice of Creation? Are we willing to pay attention to the quiet whispers from within, whispers that call us to change everything because it is the way forward for our mission in life? It calls us to a whole new way of experiencing life, a way in which we take the risk of deepening faith, challenging injustice, proclaiming peace, going the extra mile in relationships, seeking reconciliation, and knowing how to answer when someone disarmingly asks, "What have you done that you believe in and are proud of?"

There is a story about a woman who went out shopping and found a simple plaque along the way that she bought and brought home. It said, "Prayer changes everything." She hung it up in the kitchen over the sink. When her husband came home, he looked at it and said, "Take that down."

"Why," she asked him. "Don't you believe in prayer?" He said, "Yes, but I don't believe in change."

That is the problem with most institutions. Once established, they run on the grease of the status-quo. Listening to the inner voice that tells us that things could be better, more humane and equitable is one thing. Responding with courage to create change in places where the comfort zone with the way things are has been established is difficult.

In the church, change should be determined by what our mission is. Mission is what ought to drive the change. We should not do things because other churches do them, not even if they are successful in other churches. Change should come only to enhance our mission—but when it does come, we should listen. We know who we are. We know our mission.

We are all called to make a difference somehow. Even when people might say that we are too small, too weak, too insignificant to change the world, we are still called to try. Nathanael heard about Jesus from Philip, and asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip replied, "Come and see."

Calling is a difficult thing to describe because it is personal. Yet somehow your calling works its way out in how you affect the lives of others. For us, it is often in our calling that we find our strength. Many of you remember when we have been at our best—when we as a church knew what our mission was and acted on it.

Many of us remember seeing the grainy black and white footage of the civil rights marches in the sixties. Martin Luther King was often at the front, and received his share of stinging high-pressured water hoses. Rev. King once remarked that he and the other marchers had a common strength.

He put it this way, “As we went before the fire hoses; we had known water. If we were a Baptist or some other denomination, we had been immersed. If we were Methodist, and some others, we had been sprinkled, but we knew water.”³

You and I know the water. We share this common symbol, this initiation, this rite, this power in our connection to the sacred over the deep and raging chaos that so often visits us in war, in violence, in injustice and in hate.

Bernice Powell Jackson has spoken of Dr. King as being an advocate for non-violence in a violent world. She includes this now-famous quote: “We can no longer afford to worship the God of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation.” We can do better than we have...and our best days lie ahead.

As a nation we have a calling to live out our ideals. As a church we have a calling in a mission that requires that we can state who we are and act on that mission. As individuals, what is your calling to reflect upon as we celebrate the life of Martin Luther King, Jr.? If John W. Gardner’s kindly older gentleman introduced himself to you today, how would you answer his greeting, “Hello. What have *you* done that you believe in and you are proud of?”

Amen.

Please rise and join me in singing “We Shall Overcome” # 570 before our closing Alleluia. You don’t need the words—I’ll give them to you.

1 We Shall Overcome... Deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome some day.

2 We’ll Go Hand in Hand...

3 We are not afraid...

4 Our God will see us through...

5 The truth shall make us free...

Sermon Resources

- 1) Sermon Illustrations: Dr. Dale E. Turner, *MSC Health Action News*, July, 1993, p. 7.
- 2) John C. Purdy, *The Blue Mountains of China*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970.
- 3) This and other Dr. King anecdotes from Brent Porterfield’s *And The Lord Called...*

Scripture for Sunday, January 15, 2012

Epiphany 2B Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday

I Samuel 3:1-10, (11-20)

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down.

The LORD called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." Then the LORD said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever."

Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am."

Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you."

So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him."

As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.

John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth."

Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."