

3 EpiphanyB – SJ – Better Late than Never!

Mark 1:14-20 1/22/12

St. John's Episcopal Church, Salisbury, CT

The Rev. Canon Lance Beizer

Some folks are a little slower than others to respond to what in their hearts they know they are called to do. In my case, there were many years intervening between the time I first felt the call to the ministry, while I was in college, and when I finally went off to seminary in my 60s – after retiring from a career as a prosecutor – to think more deeply about how I might best honor the promptings I had been feeling ever since those days in college more than 40 years earlier.

I was a graduate student in English literature in California during the latter years of the 1960s – the era when eastern and mystical philosophy seemed to permeate the very air we breathed; so perhaps it was inevitable that I'd be attracted to the very mystical and psychologically oriented writings of Hermann Hesse – writings that later led me to a great interest in the ancient stream of Christianity called Gnosticism, which stressed inner gnosis, the Greek word for knowledge, knowledge more of the heart than of the head, and to the writings of psychologist Carl Jung, which also emphasize what resides in a person's unconscious mind, or, perhaps better, soul. And one line of Hesse's – the motto for his novel *Demian* – epitomizes the struggle that resides within the souls of many people, not the least my own: "I wanted only," he wrote, "to live in accord with the promptings which came from my true self. Why was that so very difficult?"

There are many reasons it's difficult to respond to those promptings, I think. One of the most prevalent, and certainly understandable is the tension between the expectations of the world – perhaps especially of one's own family – and those inner promptings. Indeed, those tensions lie at the very heart of the writings of St. Paul, who speaks often, and with varying images, of how we are slaves to the siren voices of our material world. And it is also the nub of the admonishment Jesus directs at Peter in their conversation on the road by Caesarea Philippi when he accuses his disciple of "setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Frankly, it's just very human for us to turn away from the promptings that we sense from our inner core. There are those truly special folks who lay down everything and who turn their backs on the blandishments that the world offers them. One thinks of St. Francis or of Albert Schweitzer or of Mother Teresa. To be sure, they had their own reward. They will be remembered far longer and more fondly than those who follow the call instead of seeking material wealth and social adulation. How fleeting fame can be is wonderfully expressed by Shelley's well-known poem, *Ozymandias*, which describes a monument built to commemorate himself by an ancient ruler – one who wanted that adulation. The last lines read:

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
 Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Another impediment to responding to those inner promptings is doubt that one is worthy, or even competent to accomplish what must be accomplished if one is to truly represent God himself. Think, for example, of the words in the Catholic mass spoken just before receiving communion (I believe this is the latest translation): “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” How many of us have felt that same sense of unworthiness, a feeling that we ought to be doing more to live a truly religious existence, but that that life is only for people with spiritual qualities we can hardly even dream of possessing ourselves. It used to be – before the reforms of Vatican II, and especially before the unfortunate scandals that have plagued that Church in recent years – that Catholic priests had a status in society that set them apart from mere mortals. They had hands, after all, it was taught, that could transform bread and wine into the veritable body and blood of our savior. How many of us feel worthy enough to be able to do that?

Setting aside these all-too-human concerns about one’s worthiness to do God’s work and the pervasive temptations of the world around us to try to succeed in *its* terms rather than God’s, there is another reason that it was so remarkable that Simon (later, of course, to be known as Peter) and his brother Andrew, and then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, should respond so immediately to Jesus’ call – the nature of the society in which the two sets of brothers lived. Admittedly, “immediately” is one of Mark’s favorite words as he moves breathlessly from episode to episode in relating the story of Jesus’ ministry. But as Matthew tells the story of how those same four fishermen became Jesus’ first disciples he uses that same word. So I have to conclude that the tradition as it was passed down insisted that they did indeed respond immediately to his call. Think, though, of what the immediacy of that response must have meant to them – and, more importantly, to their families. This was not a society in which someone could go from Hope, Arkansas, to the White House. One’s station in life was pretty fixed, and a product of his family’s status. If your father was a fisherman, you were a fisherman. Andrew and Simon were undoubtedly needed by their family, as were the sons of Zebedee, not only to carry on their families’ traditions, but, more important, to be part of the process of providing the families’ material necessities. But there’s not even a hint of indecision or of even a hastily thrown off request, like: “Let me run and tell my dad that I’ve got to go off with you.” No, “immediately they left their nets and followed him” so that they might become fishers of men instead of fish.

Even today, though, in a much more mobile society – one in which one is far, far freer to pick up stakes and change life’s direction – it’s difficult for me to imagine many people leaving family and life’s work so easily or so quickly – without any

thought, it seems, at all. Most folks, I suspect, are much more like the person depicted in Francis Thompson's poem of the 19th Century, *The Hound of Heaven*, who flees from God, who is depicted as a metaphorical hound. It begins:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the
arches of the years; I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways of my own
mind; and in the mist of tears I hid from Him....

God, Thompson suggests, will never let up his determined effort to make the one fleeing one of his own. We may feel unworthy. We may be too affected by the temptations the world dangles before us. Whatever our reason for resistance, however, God is relentless in his pursuit. Eventually, if we but let him, we shall truly be his. We need only listen attentively enough to hear his insistent call.

One person, for example, who heard it was the extraordinary French philosopher and mystic, Simone Weil, who died during the Second World War. She attributed her conversion to Christianity to having read the following poem by Anglican priest and poet George Herbert, who wrote of God's insistence that we are indeed worthy. The poem describes a conversation between God's love and someone like us:

LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'

Love said, 'You shall be he.'

'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on Thee.'

Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
'Who made the eyes but I?'

'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.'

'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'

'My dear, then I will serve.'

'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'

So I did sit and eat.¹

Through God's great love we have all been made worthy, and, in whatever capacity, we too can serve; but we can also share in that great banquet to which he calls us all – the first course of which we share at the table on our altar – so please do come and eat.

AMEN

¹ Lines separated here so as to make reading the dialogue easier.