

Are you listening?

A sermon preached by the Rev'd Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, January 18, 2009.

And Samuel said, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

Samuel 3:10

As children we all remember being told something and then asked if we were listening. Too often we were not. It is hoped that as adults we are better at paying attention and shouldn't have to be asked if we are listening.

Listening to God is essential to knowing what God wants for us. Samuel was called to be a prophet at an early age when his mother, Hannah dedicated him to God's service. He was put into the service of Eli, the priest at Shiloh, who appreciated Samuel's sense of dedication. Eli's own sons were useless in their complete disregard for priests and contempt for temple worship.

The scene opens when young Samuel is in the temple with the Ark of the Covenant while Eli is resting. The Ark is a portable shrine that symbolizes the presence of God wherever the people of God gather. When God calls him, Samuel thinks that it is Eli who is calling and answers him each time only to realize that it is not Eli, but God who is calling him. God is telling young Samuel that the elder Eli's priesthood has been harmed by his corrupt sons and that the old order of the priesthood must be replaced. As a boy of twelve, Samuel would seem too young to take on the task of being a prophet, but God often chooses unlikely people for particular tasks. God knows that Samuel has a calling. Samuel listens and responds to God's call and becomes a respected prophet throughout all Israel.

Martin Luther King, Jr., whom we honor this weekend, was a modern day prophet with a vision in the biblical tradition. He dreamed of the day when people would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. He dreamed of the day when children of slaves and children of slave owners would join hands in celebration of being free from their bonds. In the last forty years, much of Dr. King's dream has been realized, but there is still cleverly disguised prejudice and bigotry in the form of institutional racism.

I was a student during the Civil Rights era and was thoroughly committed to the changes taking place. As a college student in the south, I observed first hand the absurdity of segregated restaurants; laundromats and hotels open to white patrons only. In places like Montgomery and Selma, Alabama there were demonstrations, protests marches and lunch counter sit-ins. Many were injured and some lost their lives, including one of my seminary classmates. It was a movement to change the old ways, to break the bonds of racism, open up public accommodations, and insure voting rights, and equal opportunity for all Americans. Dr. King and other civil rights leaders marched arm in arm in support of those who suffered prejudice, bigotry and injustice. The issues were clear and the barriers had to come down.

What I didn't learn in the classroom I learned in my years as a priest in an African American congregation. Most important I learned that if we are completely honest with ourselves, none of us can claim to be without prejudice. The sooner we admit that the sooner we eradicate the traces of our own prejudice and bigotry. Before we identify with any ethnic group or race, we are all members of the human race. As people of God, we all have the same human needs and rights and responsibilities.

Dr. King heard the call of God in the same as Samuel and Nathanael. Reluctant at first, Dr. King became involved in a cause from which there was no turning back. He was willing to give his life to free all of us, black and white, from the bonds of racism. He heard the call; he had a dream and encouraged us to join him in fulfilling that vision.

In the tradition of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. King believed in peaceful non-violence to withstand the evils of prejudice, bigotry and injustice. He knew that violence only begets more violence and that violence always spirals downward. Instead of diminishing evil, violence compounds itself. You can convert someone who hates, but eliminating the fear and ignorance that causes the hatred is far more complex and difficult to eradicate. Dr. King believed that returning violence with more violence merely increases the hatred that causes the violence, adding darkness to a night devoid of stars. Darkness can't drive out darkness, only light can do that.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was possible because a coalition of people working together was willing to make the sacrifice to witness for the cause of freedom. The inauguration of our first African American president this week is not the culmination, but a milestone in breaking down racial barriers.

The gospel tells us that Jesus has the insight to know who has the right potential for being part of his mission. Andrew and his brother Peter are the first to accept the call to discipleship followed by Philip who urges a skeptical Nathanael to come and see for himself. Jesus sees in Nathanael a person of integrity in whom there is no deceit. Jesus as the ultimate link between the infinite God and finite humanity call us to the great task of reconciliation.

The mission of this congregation is to grow both in spirit and numbers. It is a fact that more people come to church because they are invited by someone. It is evident that because the average Episcopalian invites someone to church once every twenty-seven years that we need above average Episcopalians. How long has it been since you invited someone to church? Sharing how your faith makes a difference in your life can make a difference in someone else's life.

Rather than being a club for saints, the church is a hospital for sinners. If you think that churches are full of hypocrites, there is always room for one more. As a training center for Christian discipleship we are committed to a life of prayer, service, mission and ministry that requires changing our own lives to help change the lives of others.

The call to discipleship is a call to a life of holiness, not because we are special, but because our calling is special; it is sacred and set apart. This is how we change the way the world lives, one person at a time.

When God calls us to a particular task, we must not hesitate to answer. There is work to be done. Are you listening?