

Matthew 19:10-15; RIC Sunday; January 28, 2018
Rich Weingartner

Grace to you and peace from God and Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Please pray with me. Lord, be with us during this message that your word may be made clearer to us and that we feel and know your love in the words shared. Open our hearts and minds to receive your calling to us so that we may be the ones to share your grace and love with the world. Amen.

Two Sundays ago I was worshiping down in Florida and the pastor there for his children's sermon talked about God calling us. His cell phone rang several times and he answered it and said that it was God calling him, but then told the person on the phone that he didn't believe them. After a few times of doing that, he finally told God that he was sorry that he didn't believe him and talked to God on the phone. Now, it wasn't really God calling him (at least I don't think so), but that brings up the question - how does God call us, if not on our cell phones or via an email? And also, who does God call?

For the last several weeks we have been learning in the scriptures a lot about God calling people to do the work of God. Two weeks ago we had the story of God calling Samuel and how Samuel wasn't sure who was calling him and thought it was Eli, his

master, who was calling. Eli figured out it was God calling Samuel and told Samuel to listen. Samuel then heard God's calling and became a trustworthy prophet of God.

Last Sunday in the Gospel we were told of Jesus calling some of his disciples, Simon, Andrew, James, and John. This was a more direct calling with Jesus physically being there, but the disciples still had to trust Jesus to follow him, especially when it meant leaving their father and business behind. I can tell you if someone called me away to just leave my job and/or family - I'd probably give it second or third thoughts. But since God knows my personality, he probably wouldn't call me like that, God knows how to call people in ways that they will respond to.

In today's readings we start with the beginning of the story of Joseph and his brothers and father. I am most familiar with this story in Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, but however the story is told, it is the same. While the fun filled musical makes the story seem not all that bad, if we look a little closer at Joseph, we'll discover that it wasn't easy for him. Mainly, the rich ornamental robe, or as sometimes described a multi-colored coat, would have made Joseph be different and stand out from others, making people give a double take when seeing him and probably treating him as one who is different. While today we often find people wearing bright clothing of many colors, including me if you've seen me in my rainbow suit, but back in the time of Joseph, clothing was very drab, the dyes needed to color

cloth were very expensive and would have been only used for something truly extravagant. This shows that Jacob really loved Joseph to buy him this robe or coat.

Also, some sources say that the type of coat that Joseph proudly wore, one of many colors, not just a solid color, was similar to clothing that workers in the temple of the Canaanite goddess Athirat wore. Part of the duties of these workers was to have sex with worshipers of the goddess. These workers were both female and males who dressed as female. Now, we can never know for certain exactly how Joseph felt about his gender identity, but proudly wearing a multi-colored coat that people around him may have associated with clothing females wore gives pause for thought. This also could help explain, besides the dreams he had, why his brothers wanted to kill or sell him. I know in our society often times those who are viewed as being “different” are shamed, pushed to the side, and sometimes killed.

Then enters God - who uses Joseph for many great things in the following chapters of Genesis. Joseph through all the hard times of being sold into slavery, then later into jail, kept listening to God’s calling and using the skills and abilities he was given to do the work of God and saving Egypt and surrounding lands from death during the famine.

Then we turn to today’s reading from Acts where we have the story of two people being called. The first was the angel of God calling Philip to go on a desert road at a certain time. As the story progresses we may forget about the first verse of the reading and just

think that Philip happened to be in the right place at the right time, but he just didn't happen to be there, he was called to be there, and he listened and used his abilities as God intended.

The next person in the story is the Ethiopian eunuch. Let's take a moment to learn a little more about him. First, what is a eunuch? As is typical with most bible passages, there are several different possible explanations about exactly what was meant in the passage. One explanation by Kittredge Cherry is

In contemporary usage a "eunuch" is a castrated man, but it had a broader definition in ancient times. Literally meaning "the keepers of the bed," the eunuchs served and guarded the women in royal palaces and wealthy households. Their employers had to be certain that the eunuchs would not get sexually involved with the women they were supposed to protect, so many eunuchs were castrated men, homosexual men, and intersex folk. Many, but not all, were both castrated and homosexual. Eunuchs were trusted officials who often rose to senior posts in government.

(<http://jesusinlove.blogspot.com/2012/05/ethiopian-eunuch-early-church-welcomed.html>)

So, the term translated as "eunuch" probably included a variety of sexual minorities that today would be called LGBT or queer. So this eunuch was a person who would have been considered different from the majority of people. And God called him anyway.

Not only was this Ethiopian eunuch different in his sexuality, being from Ethiopia he was a foreigner, and from Africa he was of a different skin color. Three things making him different from those around him in Jerusalem, but God called him anyway.

Let look at the scripture that Philip helped the eunuch understand. An explanation from Kittredge Cherry says:

Soon the two men are absorbed in conversation about the scripture that the eunuch was reading: Isaiah 53:7-8. The passage describes the humiliation and injustice experienced by God's suffering servant. The eunuch probably chose this scripture because he had just faced rejection from religious leaders when he worshiped at the temple in Jerusalem. Eunuchs were sexual outcasts in Jewish religious society, much like LGBT people in [some churches] today. First-century Jewish law condemned homosexual acts and forbid converting eunuchs to Judaism. Deuteronomy 23:1 says bluntly, [No eunuch is to enter the congregation of God.].

Philip used the prophecy of God's rejected servant to tell the eunuch about Jesus as they traveled together in the chariot. Maybe he pointed out Isaiah's prophecy that comes a few chapters later:

To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant — to them I will give within my temple and its walls a

memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever. Isaiah 56:4-5

(<http://jesusinlove.blogspot.com/2012/05/ethiopian-eunuch-early-church-welcomed.html>)

From this explanation of the scripture God was revealed to the eunuch, and as tradition holds the eunuch converted Candace and in turn the entire nation of Ethiopia. Imagine the surprise to people hearing the story of a eunuch who was foreigner of a different skin color but still a child of God and spreading the word of God.

Now, onto the Gospel for today, which isn't so much about specific people experiencing God's call, but talking in general about who God calls and who the message of God is for.

As the Gospel reading today starts we find Jesus and his disciples in the middle of a discussion, if we back up a few verses, we find out they are talking about divorce, reasons Moses allowed it and when it is acceptable (which is a whole different topic for a different complex sermon), which leads the disciples to question, in verse 10 where our reading starts, that if the process of divorce is so difficult, why bother getting married in the first place. In summary Jesus responds by saying that not everyone will get married or should get married, but for those it works for, they should get married.

As Jesus lists some examples of people who wouldn't get married, he includes those who are born not wanting to marry - since this was biblical times, this would include a man not wanting to marry a woman, much like myself - a gay man born this way with no

desire to marry a woman. He also includes those where marriage just never presents itself as an opportunity, and also those who choose not to get married for religious reasons. By saying this, Jesus is showing that everyone is accepted for who they are, regardless of if who they are leads them to be married or unmarried.

The last part of the Gospel is very familiar to many about letting the children come to him. I'm sure many visuals pop into people's heads as they hear this - often of a nicely dressed Jesus getting down on his knees and having children come to him. It was customary in the time for children including infants, to be brought to the elders of the church for a blessing, which included the laying on of hands. We note that the disciples didn't speak sternly to the children, but to those who brought the children to Jesus.

There are several reasons why the disciples may have done this, including that they felt it was bothersome to Jesus, that it was going to delay their trip, that blessing children was beneath what Jesus should be doing since it was typically done by the elders of the church, or that the children being brought to Jesus were interrupting the deep theological discussion Jesus and the disciples were having. Regardless of the exact reason the disciples were trying to prevent having the children brought to Jesus, Jesus basically told the disciples, "no, let the children come to me, the kingdom of heaven belongs to them as well."

So here we are, many stories of God calling people and people receiving the call of God. We note that God wasn't calling the high priests and the perfect people of society,

he calls those who are the outcasts, the different, the foreigners, the people of other races, all gender identities and sexual orientations, all ages, everyone. People that were already open to God and those that were blind to him, not blind in the physical sense, but blind as in shut and closed off from God. We also learned that God is calling people to share God's message of love and grace to everyone. It is clear that God's love is for all and to be shared by all.

I pray that we all keep our hearts and minds open to continue to receive God's call to us. God calls us all in very different ways according to our abilities. Whether we receive God's call through Samaritans to be leaders to refurbish our parish house to provide hope to the young men who will be moving in, or we receive God's call from the leaders who are working on the house to provide items and time and hard work to help out. We receive God's call from organizations in our community that provide for those who have less, and we respond to that call by providing food, clothing, money, and much more.

It isn't typically one big call that God gives you, but little calls throughout the days, months, and years, from all places, from God directly in your discernment, from people at church, from people in your community, and even people just around you walking down the street or in a restaurant, the calls are all around. Calls that say "I have given you skills as a teacher, as an accountant, as a lawyer, as a nurse, as a parent, skills exactly as you are, use them to do my work, share my love and grace, it is for all."

We give thanks to God for calling all of us to give hope for the hopeless, to be light for the kingdom, to act with justice, to love tenderly, to serve one another while walking humbly with God to share his inclusive message of love and grace for all. Thanks be to God. Amen!