

Call and Community
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January 19, 2020

Depending on what circles you orbit in and what news feeds you use, you're probably hearing some conversations about candidates. To whatever degree we're aware, other state caucuses primaries are close to the starting line and poised to take their lap in the 2020 presidential race. Our neighbors in Iowa vote just two weeks from tomorrow and then New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina pick up the pace. The first 2020 Democratic debate was on last Tuesday whether you watched or couldn't care less. The Minnesota ruling on the Republican ballot leaves President Trump as the only option.

Yet, that's only one conversation out there about candidates. We, in the Episcopal Church in Minnesota, have our own separate conversation about candidates. And we are also poised at the starting gate. Whatever level of awareness this church happening has in your own life, it's a big deal. All last week, the five candidates were bussed around the state so as many Episcopalians as possible could have a chance to personally listen to them. And if an actual body in the pew wasn't possible, the gatherings were live-streamed on Facebook. The election is next Saturday. Because my husband, Daniel, is also a priest, the Bishop election is getting a fair amount of conversation in our house. In fact, we even had one time when we confused the other on which election we were talking about. I thought he was commenting on a woman Bishop candidate and he thought I was talking about Amy Klobuchar!

While there can be a case of mistaken identify between the worlds of US politics and the Episcopal Church, one rarely hears the term "call" used to discuss a Republican or Democrat running for office. But that's not the case in the church. "Call" comes up frequently in a Bishop election, both when candidates talk about themselves and when we speak about them. Yet, oddly, when I looked up the various meanings of "call", I didn't find any listing for what "call" means in the church. I found brief social visit, a cry or shout, a summons or appeal, used in a sport setting or while playing bridge or talking on the phone. None of those are even close to how and why "call" is used in the church.

Yet, all three of the Bible passages this morning revolve around and are based on the existence of a "call". Each passage points to ways of understanding this rather "churchy" word and especially why it's being used around the election of our next Bishop. Isaiah speaks of an on-going conversation between God and the tribes of Jacob and Israel. They are in exile in Babylon, captives after losing a war, and they hear an amazing message. In spite of their obviously disparate, powerless state, God calls them to be a light to other nations. "...to the one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up,... because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you." Israel is to be a light, not for their own sake and to shine out their own specialness. They have a calling to reflect God's Light to other nations. Calling points to a purpose beyond one's own glory.

Paul's first letter to the natal church in Corinthian begins by stating his call: "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...". Perhaps more than other early follower of Jesus, Paul professes a strong sense of call. Perhaps that comes from his dramatic encounter with the risen Christ on

the road to Damascus. Being thrown from a horse by a bright light and having your purpose and agenda turned upside down might leave you with a sense of something like a call! Yet, Paul is also clear that his call doesn't make him unique or particularly beloved by God. Calls happen to everyone. All are "called to be saints". All are given gifts to offer. God's bestowing of "specialness", "light", is available for all. Each story might be for one nation, but God's faithfulness is offered to all nations. Each apostle is different, but each is called. There is no gift missing because being in community is part of everyone's calling. Israel's light has no meaning or purpose without a community of other nations. Paul's gifts are diminished when standing outside a community, Calling always links with community.

And community is where our gospel story opens, where the story unfolds and where it ends - in community. John is with his disciples when he sees Jesus "coming toward him and declare(s), "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world..... And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." John declares Jesus' call, given in baptism. Following that call, Jesus begins to create community. Like the other two readings of call, community is central - there in Isaiah: a Hebrew community in exile; a community of followers around Jesus and later in Corinth.

So, there must be some strong correlation, a necessary connection with call and community, necessary from the beginning. For the first thing Jesus does as he sees members of John's community approach him is to ask: "What are you looking for?", not "Who" are you looking for?, but "What are you looking for?". So, I wonder if Jesus might be implicitly shaping those who hear a call to follow him into a community from the very first step. To know and follow Jesus happens in community. It is not a solo path. Nor is the call a "one-time call". Yes, there may be a moment, a place or word marking the beginning, but the moment, place or words are meant to involve a "staying". "They said to him, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying? He said to them, "Come and see."

With Jesus, call emerges and dwells in community. There are gospel stories of Jesus being shaped by his followers and the communities he visits. There are stories of strangers and villages shaped by Jesus and his community. While it is true and wonderful that all people are called to radiate God's life, light and love, the grounding and formation of those gifts are found and shared in community. Thus, it is the community of the Episcopal Church in Minnesota who will gather next Saturday. As a community, we will elect our next Bishop, one of 5 people. Each of them have heard an individual call to be our Bishop. And over the recent months and through this past week, they have been part of our community of Jesus followers. One of their calls will be affirmed next Saturday.

Yet, this I believe about the Christian meaning of call, whether the call of laity, deacon, priest or bishop. It is in the "staying" in community that call and gifts are most deeply revealed, affirmed and given. In one way, I'm open to whomever is elected. All five have incredible gifts and are eager to serve Jesus in the church. I'm open because the part of our gospel story I trust and hold on to the most is the "coming and seeing" and the "staying". For I have discovered in my life as a priest that communities and people are most transformed into the Saints we are called to be when we stick in there. It's in "the staying" that we come to hear the fullness of truth about ourselves and others. It's in "the staying" that we can trust ourselves and others with the words and dreams that matter most. It's in "the staying" where healing happens, not a quick surface "I'm sorry", but a fragile offering of peace from the depth of one in the precious hope it will be heard and accepted - and it is. Those experiences, and hundreds, thousands of others occur in the "staying". So, next Saturday, we will elect our new Bishop and over time, in the staying she or he will become our Bishop. Amen.