

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen

Many of you know that from the time I was a kid, I felt that I was called to be a pastor and a preacher. And that by the time I was in high school, that I had actually chosen such a career path for myself. It was all settled. But then I lived overseas for a year, finished a couple years of college, got married, and came to the conclusion that, yeah, well that was never really going to happen. So, I looked at the other things Hobart College might be able to quickly train me to do, remembered that my mother was a teacher, and her mother before her, and thought that, well, teaching was a noble profession, one which might make God smile after all, and so I got myself certified and got a good job right away teaching 7th and 8th grade. Turned out, I was pretty good at it, and I did indeed feel that I was doing something important, but as time passed, I had to admit it wasn't really a very good fit for me, and wasn't something I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing. It wasn't the school, really, that I didn't like...it was the principle of the thing.

So, as I looked at my options, I remembered my sense of calling to be a pastor and a priest. But again I thought, yeah well that's never really going to happen. But as I observed my Dad, who was making a comfortable living as a piano tuner, I thought, hmm...maybe that would be something I would like. I had helped my father some when I was in school, doing piano repairs mostly, and had occasionally gone with him on his jobs. He was self-employed, and that was a compelling idea. But the whole tuning thing was mysterious to me. How he could manipulate those piano strings to acquire correct pitch and tone, using just his hands and his ears and his experience remained a mystery to me. I never thought it was within my possible skill set to do what he did faithfully every day. Yet one day I asked him if he thought it was possible for me to learn to tune. To my great encouragement, he said, Sure, why not?!

What he hadn't said, I realized later, was Sure, I'll teach you. No, what he did was give me some of his spare tools, a couple old textbooks, copies of the PTG Journal, and an invitation to a regional piano technician's conference. Not any direct instruction. Then, after only a few weeks, he scheduled me to tune some pianos on the sales floor of a local piano store! I felt like the child whose father just unexpectedly throws him out of the rowboat that he might learn to swim! But what Dad knew, and what I was later to know myself after passing my Guild exams and establishing my own tuning business, was that such things can be learned but not taught. Oh, one can be given valuable resources and encouragement, but ultimately both the brain and muscle memory must adapt and adjust and learn. The task, mysterious as it may seem, must be realized, internalized, and personalized for true mastery to be achieved.

Jesus gives his disciples, those whom he is mentoring, a negative imperative: he sternly orders the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. He apparently did this frequently, according to the Gospels. Now, there are various theories about why he did this, but one which I find most compelling is that he knew that competent evangelism, the spreading of the "Good News", was something which could be learned but not so easily taught. In order for one to fully grasp the mysterious message that God's Kingdom was coming near, one needed to realize, internalize, and personalize the good news. Jesus may have wanted his disciples, and all his followers, to discover his true identity independently and individually, to grow their faith through the resources he provided rather than to just accept what they were being told. He gave them the resource of scripture quotations, mostly from the ancient prophets. He often gave them semi-cryptic parable puzzles for them to work out on their own. And he provided experiences, sometimes even miracles, for them to ponder. But he didn't want his holy mission to be imposed, to be just information handed-out by ones who thought themselves to be experts. He hoped and prayed, I think, that his identity and mission would be discerned without being tediously explained.

Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they answer, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” The people are trying to figure it out for themselves, and that’s a good thing, even if they don’t get it right the first time. Because, when they do get it right, they will have discovered the answer personally, and own it. And when he asks them “But who do *you* say that I am?”, Peter, who has been paying attention and trying to figure it out, gets it right. He blurts out: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” “It just came to me!” And Jesus answers him, “Blessed are you, Simon Peter! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” From the scripture’s page you can hear Jesus’ joy that Peter has realized, internalized, and personalized this insight, and that it hasn’t come from the proclamation of some random instructor, but by inspiration which is holy and mysterious.

As your pastor and preacher, I can’t persuade you about Jesus’ true identity any more than I can explain to you how to tune a piano. Yeah, that’s never going to happen. I can provide you with helpful resources, arrange some revealing experiences, lead you in prayer and praise, but no amount of doctrine or dogma that I can communicate to you will touch your heart or stir your mind like the discoveries you will make yourself. Even when I ask you to recite the Nicene Creed with me, I don’t expect you to become convinced of anything. The creed tells us that Jesus is ‘true God of true God’, ‘Light from Light’, ‘begotten not made’, but that explanation doesn’t quite suffice, does it? The real mystery here is that Jesus and his mission among us can be realized and received by us individually and personally. How can this be, and how can it happen? We might call it ‘faith development’ and discover that it is drawn from many resources, especially prayer of one form or another. But, I think we should each expect to discern just who Jesus is, for each of us, by what is mysteriously revealed in our own lives.

And, without sounding prideful, I think St. Paul and I are on the same page here: in his Letter to the Romans, from which we heard today, he again expresses his notion that the church is like the Body of Christ. He shares his idea that as members of that Body, we can use our individual and various gifts to help Christ achieve the ministerial and missionary goals of God’s kingdom, God’s dream. He writes: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, ...to be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect...each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” In other words, receive the gifts, the resources, God has assigned to you, and permit them to help you gain accurate insight into the miracles and mysteries, each of you individually. That when we gather, we can each contribute our insights, diverse and rich as they may be, to making God’s dream come true. The more diverse the merrier, and the more personal, the more glorious.

Did you notice, by the way, in the story of Moses’ birth and preservation, that it is the women who are the heroes of history? The midwives, the mother, and the sister? They conceal the true identity of Moses in a heroic act which ultimately helps fulfill God’s dream. Even Pharaoh’s daughter has a personal role to play. If you want to be a hero of the faith, and to become an effective evangelist for Christ, I urge you to be discreet. Witness freely and often about what Jesus means to you, but give others room to discover his true identity for themselves, that they may themselves truly own that blessed relationship. Permit them the space to pray and wonder without doctrinaire explanations. Point them toward resources and experiences which might be helpful, but allow Jesus the opportunity to reveal himself and his love to them personally. And then invite them to gather with us as we continue to figure it all out together. Amen.