

Samuel 3: 1 – 10
1 Corinthians 6: 12 – 20
John 1: 43 – 51
Second Epiphany

The Rev. Dr. Dennis S. Tierney
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church
Bainbridge Island, Washington
January 15, 2012

“Hearing and Seeing the Way and the Kingdom”

It may be that it’s just the coincidence of having a number of parishioners in the hospital recently or maybe it really is one of the hallmarks of getting older, but I have noticed that more of my conversations these days are about medical matters. When once dinner conversations ranged over how we were going to change the world and arguing about the best way to do that, now it seems like I spend a lot of time arguing over changes in my drug plan and changes in my list of medical concerns. Key among these concerns is whether I can still hear and see well, and, increasingly whether I can hear and see enough to get around. Aging is not for the faint of heart, is it?

I tell you this because our readings for the Second Sunday after Epiphany are all about hearing and seeing. They are about hearing and seeing God’s presence in our lives and hearing and seeing what we are to do about our relationship with the Divine Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. This is far more than the mechanics of hearing and seeing; these readings call us to consider what we hear and see and how we integrate these data into our lives. For humans are notoriously inconstant in our hearing and seeing; just try calling your children into the house when they don’t want to come in. Eye-witnesses can be astonishingly wrong. We generally hear what we want or expect to hear and see what we want or expect to see. If Advent is about keeping awake, then this time of the year is about focusing on improving our hearing and our seeing.

Samuel hears rightly but does not interpret rightly because he does not know the Lord. That takes Eli who no longer hears well but does understand rightly what Samuel has heard. The world of the Lord was rare in those days; a reality we might note in our day. The story is told in ritual fashion – the calling of the Lord occurs three times before anyone gets it. Once Samuel learns who it is that is calling, then Samuel prepares himself for the tasks that God will set for him.

In our Gospel, it is about seeing. Philip is called and sees that Jesus is the one to follow over John the Baptist. Nathanael does not see and scoffs about Nazareth, a mostly unlikely place for a Messiah to come from. Jesus reveals that he has deep knowledge of Nathanael and that opens the eyes of Nathanael and he accepts Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus speaks of even greater things that his believers will see. They will see holy things, sacred things, things no one else has ever seen. They will see a new creation unlike anything they have ever seen.

So, hearing and seeing rightly are critical skills; not just hearing and seeing correctly but hearing and seeing rightly – that is, hearing and seeing the message of God which is almost never clear or straight forward. This is so not because God is a poor communicator but rather because we are distracted by our own inner thoughts and concerns, dazzled by the baubles of the world, and caught up in all the wrong issues. So learning to discern God’s call to us is a life-time of work.

It takes prayer, it takes reflection and contemplation, it takes having a trusted friend or spiritual director to help us hear and see what God is calling us to do with our gifts.

But in that process of hearing and seeing, we must also remember that we are all called to work to twin goals. The message of Christ Jesus is about both the Way of Jesus and the coming of the Kingdom. God's desires for God's creation are not only the salvation of our souls but also the building up of the Kingdom of God. It is not enough for us to work for our personal salvation alone; we are called to be in community, to be in the Body of Christ, and to seek to help those around us, in this world as well as the next.

This is at the core of that odd passage from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians. Taken out of context, its core message can be lost. While it is true that Paul disapproved of the riotous life style of some of the Corinthians, this passage is not just a Puritanical diatribe about sex. It follows that long metaphor that Paul employs elsewhere about each of us being parts of the one body – the Body of Christ. Paul is saying that being in Body as we are as followers of Christ Jesus, we are to care for the health of the whole body and work to build up the whole body, even it means controlling our individual desires and wants. Now this is the moment where I had hoped to bring in Tim Tebow, the genuflecting quarterback of the Denver Broncos, whose last name is now a verb so that I could show how trendy my preaching is these days, but it really doesn't work here. Suffice it to say that Paul is seeking to remind those wayward Corinthians that following Christ Jesus is about following the Way and building up the Kingdom. And to do that, all of us must hear and see not just for ourselves but also for all those around us.

This is why it is insufficient and, ultimately, unhelpful to be spiritual but not religious. It is well and good to focus on one's own spiritual transformation; one should not be religious but not spiritual for that error leads to other dangers. But to only focus on one's own spiritual development and transformation is to miss the understanding that we are in relationship with one another when we are in relationship with God. If God desires a deep and eternal relationship with each of us then we are linked to one another through God. Being baptized brings us into the Body of Christ and that means being connected to each other. Our baptismal covenant calls us, demands of us that we work to build up the kingdom of God and to seek and serve Christ in everyone we meet.

We typically focus on these two intertwined goals, following the Way of Jesus and building up the kingdom of God, by creating and supporting communities of faith. Sometimes we build buildings dedicated to these purposes. Sometimes, we create organizations designed to help bring about these goals. Sometimes, we give of our time, treasure, and talents to ensure that when strangers begin to hear and see the Good News of God in Christ, they, too, can find a place and a group that will help them continue to discern what God is calling them to do in following the Way of Jesus and in building up the kingdom of God for the benefit of themselves and others.

But God has given us free choice in these and other matters. We can continue to hear and see only what we want to hear and see. We can continue to pretend that we don't need to be in the Body of Christ or that we can be rogue members of the Body of Christ and insist on our own way. But we would be wrong. As we are called to hear and see rightly, so, too, are we called by

our baptismal covenant to both follow the Way of Jesus as best we can, seeking to grow spiritually into the way of justice and peace in our own lives, and to follow with others, working in concert to build up the kingdom of God so that those who come after us will be even closer to that glorious day when there will be peace on earth and good will towards all.

And, we can do that starting right now, right here in our own wonderful community of faith. For we are the Body of Christ right now, right here. Much has been done for us in years past, but much remains to be done. Let us hear and see rightly the work we are privileged to do. Amen.