

Dissonance

January 14, 2018

John 1: 43-51

I Samuel

There is an inspirational Jewish mandate that has come down from the ancient rabbis called berakhah...it is the offering of a brief prayer of thankfulness each time one has a new experience in which God is recognized/wherein God's creation or handiwork is seen. Technically, one is supposed to offer 100 such berakhahs each day. Its functional purpose is to acknowledge God as the source of all blessings in life. These brief prayers take all kinds of forms...including just "thanks" I suppose...The berakhah most familiar to us is probably its recitation during the Jewish Sabbath worship time: Beruch ata Adonai Elohanu melacholem , the Lord our God is King, in somewhat literal translation. The practice is transformational for the one who acknowledges recognition of God in these blessings because the short prayers change a lot of how we view the world and life itself. Regular daily actions and occurrences become infused with an increased awareness of God at all times. It is a spiritual, if not religious, experience.

I really like the practice because it allows each of us to easily be involved in the vision statement of Woods Church: transforming lives and society through Jesus Christ. It doesn't take a lot of effort, simply a perspective change and a conscious awareness of what is around us...a self-

awareness, actually, of where God, through Creation, may be in our everyday lives. I also think that it has the possibility of merging some of the incongruous, dissonant and somewhat confusing perspectives we have around claiming to be spiritual but not religious. Spirituality will always notice these blessings as we acknowledge the simple joy of seeing a first flower of Spring, or the smile on a child's face or the sun after a rainy day, etc. Anyone who claims to be spiritual will notice these things and more...and that is in part because we are hard-wired to do so. It is natural for us to recognize good, however we define it. Being religious is taking that a step further wherein the source of what is recognized is acknowledged...a Creator of some kind. Being religious means that we believe there is a source or initiator of the recognized blessing. You don't have to belong by way of membership or even come to church to do either of these. Church involvement and/or membership, the third step in the process, means you have named your spirituality and religiosity as Christian and is the next step beyond religious. Church is the placen where that process may be refined and cultivated and shared and give opportunity for being worshipful. No matter where you are in the progression, the necessary protocol includes awareness/listening and responding.

The cover for today's bulletin appears to be an image of Jesus reaching beneath the water in an apparent rescue of someone who is, perhaps, drowning. I chose it because I have the sense that God is always reaching out to us...sometimes for rescue...but most often to get our attention or speak to us or guide us. And because, whether you are defining yourself as spiritual or religious or Christian, God may speak into your life at any moment.

Let me pause here as , after lots of discussion among the staff, we have a sort of Mia Copa about the Jesus on the cover looking like he is born in the USA....and I really want us to focus on awareness of God's presence and blessing, not on what God looks like. So Keisha and I have this cartoon to share

CARTOON

Truth be told, God seldom seems to appear how or when or in ways that we might expect.

The sermon title is *dissonance*...a word that originates in the mid 1500's with emphasis on disagreement or, better said, incongruity. There are different kinds of dissonance: cognitive dissonance suggests a person who simultaneously holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas or values; cultural dissonance names "an uncomfortable sense experienced by people in the midst of change in their cultural environment." Musical dissonance, as we will experience it this morning in the Hallelujah during our anthem, is a lack of familiar harmony among musical notes. Today David and the choir offer us a musical rendition of this sermon's message about awareness, as disparate and dissonant notes come together in unexpected ways to create an unexpected harmony. It is an awesome metaphor for how God works.

I chose this word, dissonance, because God so often speaks to us with a dissonant quality. Maybe it is because we don't actually expect to hear from God and so that's the way it has to happen in order to get our attention...we don't necessarily expect God to interrupt our lives in the way that God does. When we are able to be aware/ to recognize and embrace the interruption, in any case, it yields amazing results.

One day this week Heather Tober was volunteering at the front desk and, as usual, brought her daughter Bea with her. Bea tends to be a little shy and quiet and, because of her limitations, you don't always get a whole lot of conversation from her. On this particular day Maureen and I were going into the sanctuary to have prayers around the font for someone in the hospital and I asked Heather and Bea if they wanted to join us. They did and so we stood around this font. I began by asking Maureen if she had

people she wanted included and, of course, she did. Bea was next to Maureen and so I asked if she had someone she wanted to pray for. With her head down and her face not quite visible because of that ball cap she wears most of the time, she nodded her head and said/whispered clearly, "Yes." "Who would you like be to pray for?" I asked. "Yes" came the response again. After a couple of tries seeking a specific name, I looked at Heather who then asked as well, "What do you want to pray for?" Same answer, "Yes," was all she'd give us. So it was to be. Heather added prayers for the world...and as I prayed I realized that Bea's requested "yes" formed the response to all the prayers we would offer. Yes to wholeness, yes to healing, yes to forgiveness and peace and, finally, to our own responses to God's use of us and our prayer. Yes. So I prayed for "yes" to be the focused response to God's calling us to service whether in prayer or in action or in words. God met us in Bea's "yes".

You and I don't really expect God to meet us on the roads that we typically travel....don't expect to see or hear or find God in places or people on the paths with which we are familiar. In both of our texts today we find people, like ourselves, encountering Jesus in very unexpected ways. Samuel, as a child intern in the temple, is awakened in the night by a voice with a message. And then Phillip and Nathaniel meeting Jesus...the messianic king who was expected in their Jewish tradition but certainly not in the form in which he appeared: son of Joseph from Nazareth for heaven's sake. How can that come to any good? The common theme in both cases is dissonance: God's appearing in an unexpected way, in an unexpected place at an unexpected time.

All of them have in common, though, an awareness and an openness and a willingness, on the part of the receiver, to listen for/to God. In the Bible Study this week, the group gathered around the table and wrestled with the question of whether or not we are prepared/equipped to hear God. What is required/what does it take to be ready to recognize and hear God? If you are at least spiritual...this can happen to you. Whether you have been

waiting for God...or maybe even looking for God...it may happen to you. And the process will likely be a very dissonant and incongruous one. It might be summed up in words like, "When I was looking for God, God found me." Or, as our John Gospel describes the incongruity, "vs. 43-45". When Jesus found Phillip, Phillip says to Nathaniel, " *We found him.*"

Ok. Back to the bulletin cover....try out your dissonance receptivity. At first glance Jesus...or someone that our brains interpret as Jesus...seems to be reaching out to you to pull you out of the water/symbolic confusion or chaos or suffering...whatever. Anybody have a different take on what's happening in the picture? Flip it. Can you envision yourself reaching up and out to take the hand extended to you in the picture because Jesus is inviting you to find him?

I think our scripture invites us to consider both perspectives: our finding God and God's finding us. When we recognize God, as in the beruch blessings or in whatever ways God speaks to us...it is because something in us is longing for/looking for God. It is interesting to note that the John gospel tells us that Phillip takes credit with Nathaniel for having found Jesus while the introduction to the story credits Jesus as going out of his way to find Phillip. I suppose it doesn't matter who finds whom, only that there is that recognition and meeting. There is something inside that compels us to look for God. Whether that something is the hard-wiring we are created with or a survival instinct emerging from life circumstances, we must be open to finding or being found.

Leo Tolstoy says...

It is that capacity for rising above circumstances, suffering or any other type of oppression that we may call resilience: the "looking for the extended hand " that is already reaching out to find us that makes a

spiritual/religious/Christian experience. Incongruous and dissonant perhaps but beautiful when they come together at last.

Are we equipped and ready to hear God? There is one very important variable in this process of finding and being found by God that makes a huge difference. A variable that enables this transformative process because it activates our self-awareness and, in turn, activates our awareness of others. That variable is the presence of another in your life. Samuel and Nathaniel are assisted by another: Samuel by Eli and Nathaniel by Phillip. I can't say strongly enough how important it is that we have a trusted or trustworthy other in our lives: a family member, a friend, pastor, counselor or teacher, colleague or event. Reputable stranger to help point us in the right direction and/or interpret what we experience.

Abbot story

As we come to the table this morning we do so because we are seeking to be refreshed or renews or to find or be found, to be transformed maybe. We come to the table to find belonging, a place where we are known for who we are (like Nathaniel). We come recognizing and finding God as God finds us here. I'd like to superimpose that bulletin cover over this table if I could.

As we come with others...others who may or may not be the Messiah...you never know...but certainly others, along with us, who deserve respect and recognition. We come to the table and meet God somehow. Let us be self-aware that we may recognize our need to be here at this table...and let us be aware of the needs of others around us who are doing the same thing.

Let us answer, "Yes!"