

Sermon for Induction to The Church of St. George the Martyr
May 12, 2018 at 2 o'clock in the afternoon
By The Rev. Elizabeth Welch

Today happens to be the commemoration for Florence Nightingale. She is known of course for being the mother of modern nursing – and particularly for her insistence that good hygienic practices were essential to the health and well-being of patients. She defied her parents who thought nursing was beneath her, resisted the social expectation of her gender and class which was to marry a wealthy man and be a good wife, and tussled with the institution of the British army which did not necessarily want to hear, even when presented in the form of brilliant statistical analysis, that more soldiers were dying from poor sanitation conditions than from battle wounds. She is known as the “lady of the lamp” thanks to a popular image of her weaving her way through rows of her soldier-patients checking on their condition in the dead of night aided only by the light of a candle. But this image of angelic softness neglects to convey that she was tough as nails. One soldier who was in her care said of her: “it would be a brave man that dare insult her, I would not give a penny for his chance.” And she affected the profession of nursing and the running of hospitals less through the tender and selfless care of patients than through capacity to keep clear data, run statistical analyses, and convey the numbers of deaths due to sanitation problems in a way that could not be denied. One of the struggles of vocation is that there are often powerful forces trying to control and mold our callings so that they reflect the prejudices and fears of the current moment. When we are truly living vocationally – when we are following God’s call and letting God’s power move through us – there will be ongoing attempts to tame us.

Nightingale’s journey, her very specific service, began with a calling that was far more ambiguous. She wrote in her journal, “God spoke to me and called me to Service. What form this service was to take the voice did not say.” This seems to me the starting place of so many of our vocational journeys. Vocation often begins as gentle tug in a particular direction; it begins with the sense of being called into service, as Florence experienced, but only when we begin to turn in the direction we are being tugged, and only one step at a time, are the specifics of our calling revealed. Vocation is more about we must do than what we want to do. It is more about what we feel compelled to do than what makes rational sense.

Every one of you in this room has a calling, a vocation, a way to live that is uniquely yours. And many of you know too what it is like to become separated from that calling – either by your own resistance or by external forces. Vocation carries us beyond ourselves, as the author William Stafford writes “Your job is to find out what the world is trying to be.”

And what is the world trying to be and how are we to be workers in its ongoing evolutionary process? Jesus teaches us that what the world is trying to be has to do with our God whose kingdom of love and justice is the world’s ultimate calling. The prophet Micah tells us that the Divine describes our vocation in this way: “O mortal what is good and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Most of us have multiple vocations – we are children and spouses, gardeners and writers, parents and teachers, doctors and poets, grandparents and priests, deacons and contemplatives. I have three vocations so far; one never knows when a new one will unfold in us. Being married, being a parent, and being a priest. I use the word “being” intentionally, for vocation is not about doing but about being. All of my vocations inform one another, all of them have been unexpected, all of them bring joy as well as challenge. Vocation is strange and scary and mysterious. The Quaker author Parker Palmer in his lovely book *Let your Life Speak* writes this: “Vocation at its deepest level is not, ‘Oh boy, do I want to go to this strange place where I have to learn a new way to live and where no one, including me, understands what I’m doing.’ Vocation at its deepest level is, ‘This is something I can’t not do, for reasons I’m unable to explain to anyone else and don’t fully understand myself but are nonetheless compelling.” In other words, vocation comes and finds us, it grasps us, it will not let us go.

I spent most of my adult life in San Francisco, much of it working in hospital chaplaincy. I moved from San Francisco to Montreal in order to complete a Master’s degree in biomedical ethics at McGill University, or at least, that’s why I thought I was going to Montreal. I did not plan to work in parish ministry there; I did not plan to get married there; I did not plan to become a parent there. But as the saying goes, “we plan and God laughs.” When I met my now wife, Danelle, I knew I was in trouble. Not because we fell instantly passionately in love in the way of a Hollywood rom-com, but because it was clear that we were being called into something beyond ourselves, that we were in the territory of vocation. The words of Jesus that to me most describe vocation come from John’s Gospel when he says to Peter: “In all truth I tell you, when you were young you put on your belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands and somebody else will put a belt around you and take you where you would rather not go.” This doesn’t make marriage or parenting or priesthood sound particularly appealing or exciting, but I don’t mean to say that I do not love these vocations - I daily give thanks for them. All I mean to convey is that vocation always takes us into the depths. And there is something in us that fears the depths. It’s so much easier to glide across the surface of the water, than to dive beneath, but oh what unexpected divine beauty lies beneath. And how God desires to take us to the depths.

For me, to be in a committed partnership, to be married, has been the most profound teacher about vocation. For I am daily confronted with my limitations and invited to be seen and loved with, not despite those limitations. But letting oneself be seen, seeing the other as they are, that requires ongoing, daily effort. And it is more scary and more joyful and more rewarding than anything else life has to offer.

“Why?” you might ask am I going on about the vocation of marriage instead of about priesthood here in the midst of my induction? Because my wife, you see, has taught me almost everything I know about vocation. Because she daily helps me to become a far better priest than I could ever be without her, and because I can’t with integrity talk about being called to be a priest, while being quiet about my beautiful wife who has taught me most of what I know about the love of God.

In his wonderful book *In the Name of Jesus* Henri Nouwen writes that the temptation to power is the primary temptation that confronts Christian leaders. He explains, "One of the greatest ironies of the history of Christianity is that its leaders constantly gave in to the temptation of power – political power, military power, economic power, or moral and spiritual power –

even though they continued to speak in the name of Jesus, who did not cling to his divine power but emptied himself."

Nouwen is not saying we should be passive, he is not here speaking out against empowerment, or voicing our truth, or standing up against injustices, he is speaking about the temptation to have power over others. I would argue that, in truth, the temptation to power is the greatest threat to our integrity not only in the vocation of ordained ministry but in all our vocations – of marriage or parenting or art or writing – it is the clamoring for control, fighting to have the upper hand, and failing to recognize that vocation comes as a God-given gift not of our own skill and capacity and strength, that is most likely to separate us from ourselves, our God, one another, and our true calling. Nouwen explains it this way: "What makes the temptation of power so seemingly irresistible? Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard tasks of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to control life than to love life."

Where is vocation in your life? Where is the joy, where is the call to choose love over power? Have you noticed that Jesus never says that at the end of our life, what matters is how much power we have? How successful we have been? How popular we are? No, he says this: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." This is the vision of the church: a gathering of imperfect, stumbling people, who love the world and one another in these most basic ways.

I know in my heart that I have been called to this place and this time, to this beautiful Island to live with and for my family, to this Diocese and these colleagues, to this community of St. George's. I know it now after nine months more than I knew it when I called Bishop Logan back and said to his offer of appointment, "yes, I believe I am so called." The wonderful and fearful thing about being human is that we know not what the future beholds, we can only say "yes," to this moment and then the next, and then the next, without equanimity not fear.

"Yes" writes William Stafford,

"It could happen any time, tornado,
earthquake, Armageddon. It could happen.
Or sunshine, love, salvation.

It could, you know. That's why we wake
and look out - no guarantees
in this life.

But some bonuses, like morning,
like right now, like noon,
like evening.”

Listen. Breathe. Where is the tug? Where is the calling? Where is the invitation in your life at this moment to go deeper? To let yourself be seen, to let yourself be loved, to love others as they are, as God made them to be? Where is the fire that God has put in you, the gifts God has given you so that you might do justice and love kindness and walk humbly? We may think of ourselves as having small lives. Most of us will not be on the church’s calendar of commemorations, we will not have honorific titles like “the lady of the lamp”. But as individuals, and within the communities we choose to live and love, we can go deep enough to see more clearly what the world is trying to be: this place where we choose love over power, where we seek justice over personal comfort, where we learn that being led is paradoxically our path to freedom.