

Called By Our Gifts: A Holy Transaction

On the occasion of the baptism of Abbey Grace Lindfield

Epiphany 2 – Cycle B: 1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51

Many years ago, our former director of music, Barrie Cabena, was commissioned by the Royal Canadian College of Organists to compose a major work for its biennial national convention, held that year in London, Ontario. I am embarrassed to tell you that I don't remember the title of the piece, but I do remember that it was the talk of the convention. On our last day, we all gathered for the College Service, and the then-minister of Metropolitan United Church in London, Maurice Boyd, was invited to preach the sermon. I'm sure he felt we were a pretty tough audience: nobody listens to more sermons than organists and choir directors. And so, he quickly entered our world, the world of the convention and church music, and zeroed in on the extraordinary experience we had all had with Barrie's new work. He said something like, "If God wants to give the world a new piece of music that will knock the socks off an assembly of jaded church organists, first he must create a Barrie Cabena." As I recall, he spent a little time with that thought so that the delegates would consider seriously the presence of God in our world, and most particularly in their own lives; that they might be able to ponder the God of the big picture also as the God of the fine details, busy in the minutiae of life to provide enough epiphanies in peoples' experience that faith might follow.

Our readings this morning describe something like Maurice Boyd's take on the God of the fine details. If God wants to raise up a judge and prophet who will lead ancient Israel through its growing pains and eventually anoint its first king, first God must create a Samuel. If God wants to assemble a core group of disciples who will be able to carry on Jesus' saving work long after he's gone, first he must create a Philip and Nathanael, a Peter and an Andrew. And in today's Gospel, we only catch a glimpse of what Jesus saw in those he called, but it is enough for us to understand that their gifts and talents were the basis for Jesus' call. In the passage before the one we read as our Gospel, Peter recognizes Jesus as a teacher, calling him Rabbi; and Peter is light enough on his feet that he is able to leave everything and follow Jesus. Minutes later, his brother Andrew joins him. In the passage we read today, Philip's gifts are not disclosed to us, only that he came from the same city that Peter and Andrew called home. But Nathanael, we learn, is recognized by Jesus as a person of honesty and integrity. He also has a healthy balance of skepticism and faith, we see in the dialogue he has with Jesus. After suggesting the impossibility to Philip that God's Messiah would hail from Nazareth of all places, he has an epiphany and immediately confesses his faith.

Faith itself is a gift – a gift we give to one another, the gift we pray for Abbey today. We don't need a lot: Jesus famously said that all you need is faith the size of a mustard seed and you can move mountains. What we see in Nathanael today is that the gift of faith also includes doubt. Years ago, theologian Paul Tillich wrote of the interdependence of faith and doubt; that we cannot have faith without doubt; that we don't doubt without faith. Faith is caught – from parents and grandparents, from friends and the community of faith – through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit; God who lives within and among us. And whatever faith we have is enough to set us on the path of discipleship. We don't need to have a theology degree or take holy orders: all we need is that mustard seed of faith, which may well be laced with doubt, and it's enough.

Enough, because just opening the door a crack for God to slip in reimagines life for us as more than birth, life, and death. We open a third eye to human experience that suggests that everything we have and are is a gift; that not only our talents and abilities are gifts, but that our opportunities are also gifts; that not only love and meaning and purpose are gifts, but other people are gifts to us and we are gifts to them. Paul Bosch says that even our enemies are gifts, because of what they teach us. One of the advantages of being pastor of this congregation for so many years has been to really get to know the members and friends of our parish; to see how our parish functions because of who we are as one body with many members; to see that Christ Lutheran Church, Waterloo is not a building or an institution, but rather the sum total and synergy of our gifts and giftedness. And that our gifts call us into service for our parish; that our discipleship is demonstrated through our gifts.

I don't need to embarrass anyone by citing an example. Think of yourself and what you contribute to this community of faith. You are present here for worship this morning: that is a gift! If you were not here, this congregation would be incomplete: I and others would miss you and lament your absence. We offer our monetary gifts for the mission of the church: these are important gifts, as we were reminded in October of this year when we realized we didn't have sufficient finances to fund our budget. Many of you serve on committees, or help out at our fund raisers, or sing in the choir, or assist in leadership roles. Everyone contributes something freely. And that free contribution, that willing contribution, shows that we are called by our faith, and that we respond! We value that tiny room in our life that God inhabits as a permanent boarder, and we respond accordingly.

I never knew quite what to make of Maurice Boyd's fanciful example of how God writes a new piece of music. But the thought behind the illustration rings true. Our gifts, whatever they are, lead us towards a holy transaction.