

I want to begin by calling our attention to how great is the undertaking that God has brought us into. Now I don't mean how great is the life and community of St. Stephen's—there will be plenty of time for that later—what I mean is what Mark Ruyak was reminding us of last week from the prophet Isaiah: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant . . . I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

If I heard him correctly, Mark made the point that the one qualification—the only prerequisite for this vocation—is failure in the past. In a way that is what we share with Jesus, or rather what he came to share with us. He won by losing, succeeded by failing. In our culture that is still just as scandalous a notion as it ever was. We try to encourage parents of our confirmation class to let their children learn from failure as well as success. I fear that for too many failure is such a rare experience as to have become devastating by then. As parents we'll do almost anything to avoid our children's failure. In the process we rob them of the ability to recover, to grow and find their dignity based somewhere other than in what they do or how they score, in whether they succeed.

Something crucial has changed in the way our culture regards religion. Perhaps you've sensed it. It used to be when I was young that religion was irrelevant, of no real significance, as, in fact, unreal. But today, thanks to the critique of avowedly atheist commentators, largely in reaction to fundamentalism and violent *jihadis*, religion is "dangerous," suspect, and insidious. But those who undertake this critique simply overlook the fact that Western civilization owes its conception of freedom and human nobility more to Christianity, to the Judeo-Christian ethic, than it does to classical philosophy or enlightenment reason. In fact reason as it was embraced in the Enlightenment is nothing other than the fruit of human reflection on the cross of Christ.

Listen again to St. Paul who asserts that "Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." The message of the cross is not against reason; rather it is hidden inside of 'eloquent wisdom.' The power of the cross is precisely its foolishness, its weakness in a world where the strong, the wise and the successful are always first and best regarded. Yet as Paul says in another place, "When I am weak, then I am strong."

It is the voice of this weakness, the message of the cross itself, its very shame and glory that we proclaim, that is the power of God, but that we are usually blind to. Take a look with me at it in the familiar gospel of the call of the disciples we read today. With great build up the evangelist we know as Matthew signals the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy after the ominous note about the arrest of John the Baptist. It is already here in the introduction a kind of juxtaposition of weakness and hope. The present gloom surrounding the imprisonment of John is catalyst for the great light dawning.

If we are a people capable of hope, if we are susceptible to the dawn glimpsed over the horizon, then it is always our experience of darkness, of failure and fear, of shame and

foolishness that opens our eyes to see it. So it is with the call of the disciples. Jesus emerges from the desert after what can only have been as private and ephemeral a victory over temptation as was the experience at his baptism of divine adoption and approval. Immediately, in that state of emotional and physical exhaustion he begins his ministry with a message no different from that of John the baptist: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

It sounds to our ears after all these generations of the church's glory and power much more grandiloquent and commanding than it must have been. His behavior, likewise, is strange and not calculated to win friends and influence people. It would not be my recruiting technique to go up to strangers and say, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." What can that possibly mean? And whatever speculation we might bring to this odd scenario to give it some resemblance to our own experience, we must I think admit that it is not the secret sauce of evangelistic success.

I would characterize it as weak. Jesus, however we may want to see him here, seems honestly, to have a "pitch" which is not worthy of the cost, even the initial cost of discipleship of these fishermen. They leave their homes and families, their careers and obligations of filial piety. The only explanation we can bring is that he must have had a very magnetic personality. But the only evidence for that is that it is the only explanation within the range of our experience.

After all, we are very cautious about commitment. We don't want to "get in over our heads." We get very clear about what it will involve before we follow. So it is, I think, that God is always calling us; only in a few, rare, and particularly unguarded moments do we listen; and even if we should begin to hear, we are unlikely to follow. We wouldn't want to let him down, to fail, to appear foolish, or weak, or inadequate to the task. Someone has said, "God isn't interested in our ability, but only in our availability." The power of God is not located in the ask, not in the recruiting technique or the eloquence of the proclamation. It is to be found in the response, in the "Yes" of the hearers.

There are three areas of response that we are being called to at this time in our life and ministry at St. Stephen's. We have heard this call in many ways not least has been the survey that the vestry invited from the congregation earlier in the Fall. The response from that survey was quite gratifying. It has enabled the vestry to focus our response on several areas.

The first is the pattern and schedule of our worship services. Over the past decade we have developed a Sunday schedule that has effectively divided us into two congregations, one with children and one without, one with choir and hymns and one without, one with sermon and one without. At first this was a temporary solution to our remodeling effort, but one that acknowledged a new generation of families. Over time we have heard concerns and a longing to celebrate together. The bigger issue underneath these tensions, and the thing we need to focus on, is the question whether we can engage in Christian formation without the whole body. Do we simply imitate the fragmentation of our culture by dividing our congregation (ostensibly for the sake of our children) into age cohorts? Or do we in that process deny something foundational about who we are as creatures of God and children of God set in the midst of families? When we respond "We will" at baptisms to the question "Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?" we certainly do not mean we their parents

or sponsors and Godparents will. We mean the entire congregation, the whole body of Christ at St. Stephen's will. So our effort at bringing the congregation together this coming Lent is not an attempt to try out a new schedule but to bring us all together. With disruptions somehow equitably shared by both 9:15 and 10:30 congregations, we hope to begin to get acquainted and to come to know one another and trust one another. More about this from our special guest Judy Donovan.

A second call I am hearing more and more clearly is related. It is a call to Adult Spiritual Formation. By this I mean more than either "education" for adults or "spiritual" practice convey. After more than a decade of living with a Mission Statement that proclaims that we "express the love of God" by, among other things, "exploring spiritual growth," I believe it's time for us to become intentional about the development of this aspect of our mission. Our adult forum at the 9:15 service has created a very lively conversation around questions of faith and parenting. The Benedictine groups on Sunday nights this past year was a very rich contemplative experience for those involved. We've begun to allow our campus to be used by a uniquely Marin organization: a non-religious spiritual congregation. Called Integral Transformative Practice (ITP), it was inspired in Mill Valley a number of years ago by two gurus of the Human Potential Movement and the Esalen Institute. It continues to attract people for Saturday morning group meditation and talks on what we might call "spirituality in daily life." I know you would be welcome to visit or attend.

ITP presents us with a unique challenge to become more faithful at practicing our own Christian spirituality and better at articulating how it relates to Jesus the Christ, to the Church, and to the Gospel, as well as to our own life. This is especially urgent as we see increasing interest among young adults throughout our society in the spiritual life and its relationship to justice and service. I am pleased that for the time being we have the Rev. Mark Ruyak among us whose expertise and experience at Grace Cathedral has been in young adult ministry and in adult spiritual formation. I hope we can make use of his talents and commitment to further develop our own vision for "spiritual growth." I also hope we can find a way to help him while he looks for a paid permanent position.

That brings me to the third voice that is calling us. As most of you are aware, Sylvia Miller-Mutia plans to be in school next fall at CDSP taking a course in Anglican Studies designed to augment her Master of Arts in Religion from Pacific School of Religion and move her toward ordination in the Episcopal Church. Sylvia is in her sixth year at St. Stephen's and she has done a phenomenal work helping us to develop our children's and youth ministries and our Arts and Spirituality ministry especially Camp Create. Now, as we face her departure, is the time for us to assess our progress and ask what we want for the future in the areas of Sunday School, Children's ministry, Youth work, and our Camps programs. Very quickly we must begin to look for her replacement, but in order to do that, we must dream what we want our ministries in these areas to look like in five years so that we can find the person or persons we want to help us get there.

With the enthusiastic encouragement of Mike North who has served as director of financial development for the past year and now is on a stellar slate for election today, the Vestry has authorized a committee to craft a long range financial plan for the parish to help us to both

coordinate our fundraising efforts and to project growth and funding of our mission into the future. It will not be lost on any of you that we are short of both clergy and lay staff. In the stiff competitive charitable environment that we find ourselves in we need the best information about both our needs and opportunities so that we can reach our full potential as a dynamic parish. Otherwise, by default we will both staff and plan for decline as we continue to look to see how much we have at the end of the Every Member Canvass to work with before we can decide what our mission can include. Because of this close connection of mission and funding, I will ask the vestry to add to a financial plan the development of a long range strategic mission plan, developing a vision for our future direction and staff needs to realize it.

It is, of course, very weak to simply call for certain things. The real power of God is always to be found in the response. There is much in what I have said for you to respond to, for you to have your say about, to become part of the process as we look toward Lent and begin to bring together two parts of our body separated by time. It is in that response, not in my weak presence and call to you, that God's miraculous action will bring you and all of us the blessing. Thank you for listening.