

It's Not About You!
Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:1-8
August 31, 2008

What an exciting month it has been! We've watched the Olympics in Beijing as athletes from around the world gathered to participate in one of the highlights of their lives. They devoted years of practicing and perfecting their talent in order to receive that call that comes only every four years, the call to be a part of their country's Olympic team. The world delighted in watching the gifts of athletes from volleyball on the beach to the track field to the basketball court to the balance beam and the swimming pool, where Michael Phelps won his historic eight gold medals.

Our nation's attention quickly turned from the Olympics to political conventions and the selections of Vice Presidential candidates. The gifts and skills of candidates are being scrutinized so that our nation will make a wise selection about who should be called to serve as the next President of the United States.

We've heard from scripture how God gifts each of us with a variety of gifts and talents. Each of us has gifts planted deep within us, gifts to be used for God's delight and in the service of one another. No one of us has all the gifts. That means that we need one another to make a whole community. Our gifts are not meant to enhance our own status in society. Our gifts are meant to be given away, shared in community, utilized for the betterment of all people.

The Bible provides many examples of people who used their gifts to serve others and their communities.

God called Noah to use his carpentry skills to build an ark to shelter humans and animals from a flood. Right now persons trained in disaster relief are using their gifts to guide the residents of the Gulf Coast through Hurricane Gustav.

A few weeks ago we heard God call Joseph to use his gifts in financial management and stewardship to prepare the nation of Egypt for a disaster of another kind – a famine. Unfortunately famine still frequently strikes the continent of Africa and God calls on others those skilled in agricultural development and food production to share their gifts.

When people needed a sacred place to worship God, God called together artisans, woodworkers, sculptors, weavers, carpenters, and metalworkers to build the Temple. Many such artists have contributed their gifts to create the sanctuary in which we worship today, people unknown to most of us, but who generously shared of their talents and skills so that they and future generations like us could worship our God.

People have always needed leaders. God has gifted Moses, Deborah, Joshua, Nehemiah and others with the ability to bring communities together in

orderly ways to accomplish tasks to benefit the common good. Civic leaders chosen to serve the public have an awesome responsibility.

In certain seasons of life we find ourselves in need of care. God called midwives to care for the infant Moses; Ruth to care for her mother-in-law Naomi; Stephen to lead deacons in care of the hungry. Today we are grateful for persons in the helping professions who tend to us when we are in need.

Several of Jesus' friends were fishermen, Simon, Andrew, James, and John. They provided a staple food for people of their day. Today most of us are dependent upon farmers and laborers, manufacturers and packagers, truckers and grocers who supply the food we take for granted.

Lydia was a retail business woman, selling purple-dyed goods; out of her earnings she provided hospitality to the missionary Paul and his partners when they were in Philippi. Today few of us make our own clothes. We are dependent upon factories, seamstresses, and too often sweat shops to shelter our bodies.

The common theme in all these instances is that God called people to use their gifts in the service of others. God gifts us not for our own benefit. The gifts I've been given are not intend for my personal profit; they are meant to benefit you and others. The gifts you are given are not about you – they are about **us**, about serving the common good. We are gifted in order that we might keep on giving. The scripture encourages us “not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment.” We aren't in this alone; we are in this venture with one another and for the well-being of the whole community. We honor God when we use our gifts to strength the whole body, not just ourselves.

Yesterday we hosted a memorial service for a woman who attended worship occasionally but was not well known in our church. When I asked Nancy Flood if our Reception Team would host the reception, her pleasant response was, “This person deserves a nice farewell even if we did not know her.” Such is the spirit of selfless service, of using our gifts for the benefit of others. This ministry of hospitality continues to be a wonderful witness of the nature of this congregation and the compassion of Jesus Christ. Our gifts are meant for giving.

This weekend we recognize Labor Day. The term vocation is commonly associated with one's work. The Latin root is *vocation*, meaning “voice” or “a voice calling.” Spiritually speaking it means “a calling from God.” Frederick Buechner suggests this definition of vocation: “the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.” Our gifts are meant for serving others.

Moses heard the voice of God calling him. He was a shepherd. He wasn't qualified to be a politician in the court of the King of Egypt. He protested that he stuttered. God was not in a mood to put up with excuses; people were suffering and in need of help. Neither our past, nor our limitations, nor our human failings

can prevent us from being useful to God if we are faithful to follow God's leading. Though we may question our worthiness and abilities, God is able to use us anyhow.

David Steele was a Presbyterian pastor who also taught at the seminary I attended. He wrote prose poetry about the Bible. Here is his poem about Moses:

*It is natural, one supposes,
to feel somewhat inadequate
when confronting burning bushes.
It is natural, one supposes
when we really have our attention
directed to a crucial need in human life,
to feel our own resources
are not enough.
At the burning bush we empathize with Moses.
We can hear him say:
"I'm not religious enough for this job, Lord.
I can't go to Egypt. I'm a wanted man there."
Bud is stronger.
Send him.
Judy's a better talker.
Send her.
Bill has better training.
Send him.
Mike and Nancy have more energy.
Send them.
The trouble with burning bushes is
they don't go away.
At burning bushes
we hear our names called.
We feel inadequate.
We know someone else could do it better.
We don't want to be bothered.
We wish the bush would go away.
But burning bushes are very personal, and
that burning bush is for me.
Not Shirley.
Not Bud.
Not Judy.
Not Bill.
Not Bob.*

*And not Mike and Nancy.
The burning bush I see is my own.
It is my name that is called.
It is the part of human need to which God calls me.
No matter how I try to escape
the name that is called
remains the same.
“And I hear the voice of the Lord saying,
‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’
Then I said,
‘Here I am! Send me.’”ⁱⁱ*

The gifts of God equip us to respond to the call of God. That call may come in unexpected ways and at unanticipated times. Answering the call may oftentimes be inconvenient, interrupting plans which we had already made. The continuing ministry of Jesus in our time and place is dependent upon our response. When we respond, we find ourselves, like Moses, standing on holy ground in the very presence of God. We find heaven touching earth through us. We discover that our gifts are not just for me; they are for us! We need one another. We depend upon one another. That’s community. That’s the body of Jesus Christ.

May we rejoice in the gifts of God given to each one of us, receiving gifts from one another with openness and gratitude.

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 95.

ⁱⁱ *Presbyterian Survey* (July/August 1988).

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