

God always calls you back

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Marietta, GA
by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, June 10, 2018

The Third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 5, Year B) (Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23)

1 Samuel 8:4-20: *All the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations." But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to the Lord, and the Lord said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."*

So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; [and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers.] He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day."

But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, "No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles."

Mark 3:20-35: *The crowd came together again, so that Jesus and his disciples could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.*

"Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"—for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Today's readings bring up some complicated ideas, but they don't spend a lot of time explaining them. They are probably best understood in the context of the whole story of salvation. Jesus' exchange with the Pharisees is an example. The Pharisees say that the spirit that empowers Jesus is the devil. But Jesus' spirit is the Holy Spirit of God. Saying that God the Holy Spirit is the devil is about as bad as it gets. Jesus even calls that unforgivable, since that attitude is so directly resistant to God, so directly opposed to God, so directly blind to God.

I think this brief comment about an unforgivable sin makes a lot of people fearful, worried that something they have done might qualify as unforgivable. But we should not be paralyzed by this

fear, especially in light of Jesus' message about grace. Jesus' comments that all other sins are forgivable is actually a radical statement, especially for the Pharisees to hear. Jesus' rhetoric exactly reverses the Pharisee's assumptions about who is forgiven and who is not. The challenge that Jesus makes repeatedly to the Pharisees in the New Testament is of the promise of repentance, the promise of forgiveness. The Pharisees have forgotten about God's capacity to forgive. God showed his capacity to forgive time and time again with the people of Israel throughout their history. God let them turn away from him, but God always called them back.

In the reading from First Samuel today, the people are asking the prophet Samuel for a king. Israel was a loose confederation of tribes. This didn't always work too well, and they faced waves of brutality and lawlessness. But the reason that the people want a king is not for stability. Rather, they want to be "like the other nations." It's as if they were saying to Samuel 'Look, dad, all the cool kids have a king, why can't we have one too?' This request displeases Samuel and it displeases God too.

Why? They are displeased not out of some opposition to kings or government. Rather, God is displeased with their request because they already have a king. God is their king. God already fought for them and provided for them. And yet, again, they turn away from him. So, this time, God lets them have their choice. God basically says, "OK, if that's what you want, let's see how that works for you." We are free to turn away from God.

It may sound from this passage as if God is turning away from them or abandoning them. But no, like Jesus' statement to the Pharisees, God is warning them. God will let them turn away from him, and things will get bad for them, but God will always call them back.

The people got a king, of course, King Saul. Then King David brought fidelity to God, but David's sins left their mark too. The kings that followed were sometimes faithful, but all too often turned away from God. When the kings and people fully went their own way, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, and the remnant of survivors were taken into exile in Babylon. It was the darkest time for God's people. But God was still their true king, and even in their deepest darkness, he called them back to him. One day at a time, he renewed and restored them as his people and returned them to their home. They bore witness to the rest of the world of God's grace and mercy to them. Whoever was the government on the ground, God was still their king. And God always calls us back.

These are stories of hope for us. God loves us and cares for us. God warns us about foolish choices that we can make. God leaves us free to make our mistakes too. But God always calls us back. God desires our return and restoration, even in the darkest of places. We've all faced our own blunders. Sometimes we fear that we have gone so horribly wrong that God could never want us or help us out of the mess we've made. But God always calls us back. God always calls you back.

Today, Renee McCormick will speak with us about the work of The Extension. The Extension is a residential addiction recovery program for men and women who have reached the very bottom of their disease. The Extension provides a supporting environment for men and women to work their 12-steps of recovery, to support one another, and get their feet back on the ground and get their lives back together. Each Wednesday and Friday, a group from St. Peter & St. Paul cooks

breakfast at the men's location, they lead a Bible Study and pray for them. We've learned to know several of them over the years and heard their stories. We offer support to the brave and challenging work that the counselors and leaders of The Extension provide. And we've seen first-hand the amazing power of God's grace to transform lives.

Addiction is one of the darkest holes of human experience. Addiction is a trap that we dig ourselves into until there seems to be no way out. I often use the stories of addicts as an example of the story of sin and forgiveness because of how vividly it displays not only the dark trap of sin, but the unbelievable power of God to renew and restore what seemed lost.

So many sins in our lives seem minor. We justify many, we avoid thinking about others, and we get away with most. Rarely do we think about sin for what it is: a self-inflicted trap from which we need freedom. Our culture wants us to be free to sin, but sin enslaves us. There is no clearer example of the dark trap of sin than addiction. At the bottom of that darkness, it feels impossible to make a better choice. And yet, there is no clearer example of God's grace and healing power than of the recovery of addicts.

These are men and women who have truly stared that darkness in the face. And these are men and women who have discovered that the path to life and freedom lies in surrender to God. Every day, one day at a time, they turn to God as king. They lean on God's grace—God's love that is undeserved and yet given. They lean on God's grace to help them find serenity and sobriety one day at a time. And God sets them free.

Programs like the Extension, or Alcoholics Anonymous, which meets here on Friday nights, or Narcotics Anonymous, which meets here on Thursday nights, bring hope to those who feel trapped. God let Israel make its own choices and deal with the consequences. But God did not abandon them. He sent prophets to call them back to him. Righteous kings blessed the nation and the faithful preserved God's people through hardship and exile. In the fullness of time, God came himself in Jesus, to extend that forgiveness to the world, to bring light to enlighten the nations, and hope to people in darkness.

The story of Samuel and the kings and their God—the story that the Pharisees forgot when they met Jesus—is the story of God reaching out to save his people. God always calls us back. God always calls you back. God calls you back from whatever places feel dark. One day at a time, walking more closely with God, we learn to hear his voice again, we learn to trust his ways again, and we feel the strength and renewal of his Holy Spirit in our lives, breathing new life and shining new light.

These readings today give us parts of the story of salvation. But the story is perhaps best put together in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. The father lets his son go and waste his inheritance in a foreign land until he hits bottom and thinks himself unworthy to be called his father's son. And yet, when the son turns toward home, the father runs out to greet him, embraces him and celebrates his return and restoration. This is the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Good news of God's love for his people.

The story of God and his people is a story of hope and renewal. God always calls us back. God always calls you back.