

Today in the life of St Andrew's we celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation as two Christians deepen further their lives in and through The Episcopal Church – one confirmed and one received into our tradition. To the two being confirmed or received, we count it a privilege to part of your lives on this significant day. Later during this liturgy we will make a vow to do all in our power to support you in your life in Christ.

This morning's Gospel is John's depiction of the call of Philip and Nathanael to follow Jesus. We also hear about the call of Samuel in our Old Testament reading, and today's psalm indicates that we are called before we are born. Everyone gathered here this morning is called. By our baptism we are a people "called out" for a purpose beyond ourselves; the Greek word for "church" is "ekklesia" which means "the people called out."

Having said that, I want to emphasize this morning that baptism is more than "plugging in" as part of the Body in order to do the work of the Church. It is more than getting a job assignment in order to help the Body function. Paul writes of the Church as a body – specifically, the Body of Christ – and each of us is a member of this Risen Body of Christ. And some are called to be apostles, and some prophets, and some teachers, and so forth. Each member has a calling, a role – all true. In a sense, we "plug in" to serve the Body – to build up the Body.

But this morning I want to suggest that the "calling" is all those things, and more. Your baptism is more than "plugging in" as part of the Body to do the work of the Church. Philip and Nathanael are called to something beyond themselves, but the calling is more than "church-work," however noble, and valuable, and needed.

We speak of baptism as a NEW birth. It is the beginning of a life of conversion to Christ, and it includes a lifelong journey to discover two things: our truest selves and our deepest longings. For we have a great thirst for purpose and meaning. We have a deep desire to connect our faith and our service (our action, our work); a desire to connect our faith and service at the heart level.

The writer and spiritual director, Frederick Buechner, defines our true calling as "the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need." Simply put, if we are honest, we want the two to match. We want our deep gladness and the world's deep need to match – and that is a question of discernment and vocation.

The word “vocation” comes from the Latin word, “voice,” and so we think of discerning vocation as listening for the voice, listening for the calling. Parker Palmer, a Quaker (Quakers do much more listening than speaking), says that “vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. ... [And yet] Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be ... accepting the treasure of the true self I already possess.”

So true vocation, true calling, intersects with true self. The two meet. In other words, we are not called to be something we are NOT. We are not called to pretend to be something we are not – even for the noblest and loftiest purposes. We are not called to imitate someone we are not – even those of such high purpose as Pope Francis or Presiding Bishop Curry. We are not called to “fake it” for the sake of the highest cause. Rather, we are called to discover and be who we are – authentic selfhood.

(Life is full of chores, or challenges, we don’t feel called to do. I’m not talking about that. It won’t work to say, “I’m not called to take out the trash.”) I’m talking about the intersection between authenticity and vocation, between true self and true calling. Not pretending. Not faking it. Being who we are. And trusting that God wants that and calls us to that; that our true nature is called by God for a purpose.

Parker Palmer (the previously mentioned Quaker) has written a little book about vocation, entitled, “Let Your Life Speak.” I recommend it to anyone who is working through a period of discernment.

He tells a story about the intersection between true self and a calling to serve God’s purposes – perhaps an especially appropriate story, as we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr tomorrow. He tells a story which takes place on December the first, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama. An African-American woman, a seamstress in her early forties, Rosa Parks, did something she was not supposed to do: she sat down at the front of a bus in one of the seats reserved for white people – a dangerous, daring, provocative act in a racist society.

Years later someone would ask Rosa Parks why she sat down at the front of the bus that day, and her answer is a little surprising – not at all spectacular. She did not say that she sat down to launch a movement. Her motives were more elemental than that. She said, “I sat down because I was tired.”

Palmer suggests that “she did not mean that her feet were tired. She meant that her soul was tired, her heart was tired, her whole being was tired of playing by racists rules, of denying her soul’s claim to selfhood.” He says, “the moment she sat down at the front of the bus on that December day, ... it was a moment of existential truth, of claiming authentic selfhood, [of reclaiming her birthright, reclaiming God’s gift] – and in that moment she set in motion a process that changed both the lay [of the land], and the law of the land.”

“Rosa Parks sat down because she had reached a point where it was essential to embrace her true vocation – not as someone who would reshape our society, but as someone who would live out her full self in the world. She decided, ‘I will no longer act on the outside in a way that contradicts the truth ... on the inside. I will no longer act as if I were less than the whole person I know myself inwardly to be.’”

And perhaps what follows is Palmer’s chief point. He says we can look at the great liberation movements of our times – in South Africa, in eastern Europe, and among women, and African-Americans, and what we see is simple, but often ignored: “the movements that transform us ... and our world emerge from the lives of people who make a choice for authenticity.”

In the face of political systems, forcing them to live in a way untrue to who they are, and risking punishment, they decide to live “divided no more.” They decide no longer to act on the outside in a way that contradicts some truth ... they hold deeply on the inside. They decide to claim authentic selfhood, and act it out -- and their decisions ripple out to change the society in which they live, serving ... millions of others.”

Parker Palmer calls this “the Rosa Parks decision.” In 1955 Montgomery, Alabama, who possibly could have dreamed it?

Every day you and I are faced with the same decision, the choice: to pretend and fake it, or to claim authenticity, to claim our true nature, to reclaim God’s gift.

One defining moment on a bus ripples out to liberate a land. One defining moment on a cross ripples out to liberate a world. Defining moments and ripples: isn’t that what happens at baptism? We enter the waters of baptism, and God creates a ripple. That’s true for each of us as individual members of the Body; it’s true for the Body of Christ; it’s true for us, the people of St Andrew’s Episcopal Church.

We enter the waters of baptism and we are called to our true vocation to embody the attributes of Jesus: to embody the love of Jesus (a love without conditions); to embody the grace of Jesus (unearned, unmerited grace); to embody the forgiveness of Jesus, who forgives from the cross (no apologies requested first); to embody the compassion of Jesus, who touches the leper; to embody the mercy of Jesus for when we fail.

We step into the waters of baptism, and true vocation is claimed. Who you are born to be is accepted and claimed. And we participate in what happens next: a ripple effect, as all are liberated by this Good News of God's unconditional love – which we are called to proclaim in the Name of the Holy Trinity, one God, in Whom we live, and move, and have our being. Amen.