

Year B, Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 17, 2021
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“And Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’”

Good morning to you. I hope you are well.

Last week I was so grateful for our Presiding Bishop. His words, the spirit of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. he invoked, the Word of God about the strength of Love and the strength needed to Love were just what the doctor ordered. I was grateful for the Word he opened for us, as well as the fact that I didn’t have to preach. Don’t get me wrong, I had plenty of things to say last week, just ask Windy, but those were my thoughts, my words and very little of it was *The Word*.

I have been awash in feelings. Well, along with most of the nation, I’ve been up to my neck in feelings this whole year, these past two weeks have just been a surge in feelings with the insurrection at the capitol, the second impeachment and the continuing emergence of threats to our democracy (as well as a surge in COVID numbers in Maine and just about everywhere else). Lots of feelings, resentful, angry feelings, mostly. Some fearful ones (fear pairs well with anger). Incredulity, “How dare they! In the middle of a pandemic!?” Sadsness. I have felt self-righteously justified. (That is a dangerously satisfying feeling). And lot of feeling laid low, depressed, exhausted, hopeless. I have eschatological hope, all shall be well, but between now and then... that has been harder to grasp for me. But I keep going back to being resentful, after all we’ve been through, this had to happen... which gets me angry.

Feelings are important. This whole thing, the Epiphany uprising is all about feelings. (It is certainly not about truth or facts). Dr. King preached on this in a sermon on Luke 23:34 called “Love in Action.” The verse from Luke reads “Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” He wrote,

“...they know not what they do. What a tragedy!

“History abounds with illustrations of this shameful tragedy. Centuries ago a sage named Socrates was forced to drink the hemlock. The men who called for his death were not bad men with demonic blood running through their veins. On the contrary, they were sincere citizens of Greece. They sincerely thought Socrates an atheist because his idea of God had a philosophical depth that went beyond traditional concepts.¹⁴ It was not badness but blindness that killed Socrates. The Apostle Paul was not a bad man when he was persecuting Christians.¹⁵ He was a sincere conscientious devotee of Israel’s faith. He thought he was right. He persecuted Christians

not because he was devoid of sincerity but because he was devoid of enlightenment. The Christians who engaged in infamous persecutions and shameful Inquisitions were not evil men but misguided men.¹⁶ The churchmen who felt that they had an edict from God to stand in the way of scientific progress, whether in the form of a Copernican revolution or a Darwinian theory of evolution, were not mischievous men, but misinformed men.¹⁷ And so Christ's words from the Cross may be written in sharply etched terms across some of the most inexpressible tragedies of history: "They know not what they do."

Believing something, feeling something doesn't make it true. The feelings are true. Feelings are reactions to the world, those are very real, feelings. However, we can have very true feeling about very untrue things, especially if we are being manipulated by the principalities and powers of the world.

When something tragic or traumatic happens, all sorts of feelings go through our minds. Most of us have grieved something: a tragedy, death, loss, mistakes or failures. And thoughts of all sorts go through our minds in those moments. Thoughts that you might never entertain consciously may flow through our minds. That's what we do when we grieve, when we experience trauma; we are awash in feelings and the best thing we can do is let them happen. Just let them happen, don't resist them, be a sieve, let them through.

"But I have these sinful thoughts, hateful, even violent." Yes. Many of us do. Violence is a very natural occurrence. Your cute little kitty, purring on your lap is actually dreaming of murder. Jesus says that lustful thoughts are as sinful as adultery. But it is not the thoughts themselves that are the problem. Lustful thoughts are hardwired into our biology. None of us would be here if someone didn't have lustful thoughts along the way. It is what we do with those thoughts that matters. You have bad things flowing through your mind, let them flow, don't entertain them, don't linger on them... that is where the sinfulness, the danger in all that flows through us occurs.

How about you? What have you been feeling? Share a word or two if you like.

Feelings aren't right or wrong, they just are. It is what we do with them that matters.

Bishop Curry's sermon last week posed the title of a book by Dr. King as an question that persists as urgently now as when he wrote it in 1967: "Where do we go from here: Chaos or Community?" (It is free on Audible.com is audiobooks are your thing).

So where do we go from here? You. Us, this parish. Us, Mainers, Americans, Christians, human beings, where do we go from here? In the next days, months, years... where do we go from here?

In part, this is a question of call, of discernment, figuring out what we are supposed to do. But truly, and most importantly in times like these that are so fraught, so full of feelings, so much chaos in the air, is that we must really do our best to find and follow the will of God. We need to submit to the will of God. The will of God, the way it is supposed to be in a universe whose arc bends towards justice and peace and love and truth, that is what I, our readings today, our times are demanding of us. This is so hard because the will of God isn't always, at least in the short-term, what is best for us, though too often that is the test we use. If it's good for me it must be from God! It isn't our best interest that matters, or the best interest as members of our local community, or as Americans or as Christians, it is not even about our best interest as Democrats or Republicans... It is about God. We need to submit to the will of God. Submit. Now there is a word Americans do not like. Windy had a group of pretty radical homeschool moms out in Oregon. They were going over the State requirements for homeschool reporting and families were asked to submit some paperwork. The conversation was over at "Submit?!?"

Submission is hard. For some it is hard because maybe you are forced to do it, daily perhaps. That is what oppression is, one group forcing another to submit to its will. Race, gender, religion, sexuality, class... these are the typical sites of oppression, indicators of who must submit to whom.

For others of us, submission is hard because we don't have to do it very often. (Or at least we can get away without submitting very much or very often). That's a definition of privilege, be it white privilege, male privilege, straight, educated, wealth/class based privilege, any form, it is all about who you have to submit to, and how. Because, regardless of how unjust submission can be, how onerous it can feel, it is a fact of life. Children submit to parents. Employees submit to employers. Citizens submit to laws. Democratic governments and their leaders submit to the will of voters. The question of submission, therefore, is to what? To whom?

Our two readings today, the call of Samuel in 1st Samuel and the call of the disciple Nathaniel in St. John's gospel are about this, about submission to the will of God. It is uncanny, sometimes, how well the Lectionary, created so long ago, lines up with what we need today. It is better than weather predictions in the *Farmers Almanac*. We must submit to the will of God.

Why? Why must we submit to God? Well, that is not the topic of the day, but briefly, it all comes down to the sovereignty of God. Sovereignty, "supreme power or authority." That is God the Almighty, our Sovereign. Why is God that? Read Job 38 – 41. That's God's answer to Job "from the whirlwind." Or consider our psalm today. "LORD, you have searched me out and known

me * you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar...” God created everything and therefore knows everything in every possible meaning of the word *knows*.

My primary theology professor, Sarah Coakely, now of the original Cambridge in England, wrote a book called *Powers and Submissions*. She has a powerful, and nuanced, feminist hermeneutic, so submission is a complicated topic, and yet she knows the God given need for submission that all humans have. Her take is that submission is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. Who you are (which includes what you are – who know the old adage, “where you stand depends on where you sit”), changes how submission to God works.

For the lowly, the oppressed, submission to God is like being granted an audience with the Almighty! You are welcomed to the presence of divinity, you are given an honored place at the table of God. And you bow because it is not only polite, but being in the presence of Goodness with a big G demands bended knees.

For the powerful, the oppressor, or the beneficiaries of oppressive systems, submission to God is a lot more grovel-ly. We are put in our place, reminded of in whose hands our destiny, our very life is held. And that is good for us. Very good for us and very, very good for the world.

In submission to God, the lowly, the meek are lifted up to God; the strong brought down a couple of notches, knocked off their blocks a bit, reminded that they are not in charge, no matter what the perishing world tells them.

I stress the need to submit to the will of God religiously, because the will of God can be a bitter pill to swallow. It can go against what we thought we believed, what we think to be right, what we think will be good for us, or is against something as small as self-interest. (Well, small from a God’s eye view, which is the point, because our and our people’s interest are usually at the top of our list of discerning if something is of God, not the welfare and well-being of all). Samuel answers God’s call, “Speak, for your servant is listening” and God promptly tells him that God was about to punish them, Samuel’s people “...forever, for the iniquity he (Eli) knew...” In John, Nathaniel scoffed at the idea of Jesus’ authority, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

God’s will, while it is always Good News in the biblical sense of the term, isn’t necessarily good news in a daily living sense, it isn’t necessarily good news for us and the structures we inhabit, especially if we are on the side of the mighty, who, as Mary teaches, are sent away empty while the hungry are filled with good things.

Does all of this bring up feelings for you? It does for me. And a lot of questions. How do we discern God’s will with eyes and ears so tuned to the ways of the world? How do we know

something is from God? And then how do we have the strength and courage to be and do what God would have us be and do? That verse that Dr. King preached on, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Jesus said that *while* being crucified. That is the strength of love; how do we find the strength to love like that?

So this is the first of a three part series on submission to the will of God. This week we talked about that we need to submit to the will of God, especially in complicated seasons of history such as this one. Next week we’ll talk about discerning the will of God, how we discern, and then on the following Sunday we’ll talk about how to follow that will, how to wield the authority of God. So for now, keep your hearts and minds open and be like a sieve, let the feelings just pass on through, because this ain’t over. But do remember, God is with us. AMEN.