

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

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In the Name of our One Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In today's reading from the Book of Genesis, we move from primordial myth as in the Flood story to the area of legend – the start of the story of the Patriarchs; the story by the Jews of how the Jewish people came to be. Based on stories long told orally, they may have some basis in fact although the characters may be composite or archetypal figures. The story starts with a relationship – God calls to Abram, telling him to leave his country and his family and his father's house and go to “the land that I will show you.” God sweetens the offer with some promises: from Abram will come a great nation, God will bless Abram, making his name great, God will be with Abram and bless those who bless Abram and curse those who curse Abram, and finally through Abram all the families of the earth will be blessed. The story tells us that Abram went. Following this call to go to an unknown place, he travels through the land of Canaan stopping at Shechem where God appears to him promising this land to his offspring – of which he now has none. They then continue on their journey to the unknown and enter Egypt.

This is how the God we know enters human history – through a unilaterally initiated relationship with some unknown man from Ur. From this legendary encounter spring forth Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All claim Abram as their ancestor. When I read this chapter, I realized that at this point we know absolutely

nothing about Abram. Why did God pick Abram? Why did Abram go as the Lord had told him? In our reading from the letter to Romans, Paul refutes the idea that God chose Abram because of his righteousness as evidenced by the later stories of his relationship with God. No, Paul says, that all came later. He was judged righteous before the covenant and circumcision. It was Abram's faith, his trust in God that God reckoned as righteousness. If you read the stories of how Abram became Abraham you will find a real human being – part saint and part scoundrel. It seems it wasn't his goodness that mattered as much as his trust in God to move his life forward.

In our very busy Gospel reading today, we see another call. Jesus, walking along sees a man named Matthew sitting at the tax booth. He tells him, "Follow me!" And he got up and followed him. Mark and Luke have similar accounts, but the tax collector is identified as a man named Levi. There are several things that are unusual in this brief narrative. The first thing is that Jesus is the one doing the calling. Here is a teacher that calls his students. That is as unusual in the 1st Century as it is today. Unless you were a star athlete, chances are that the universities didn't come knocking on your door. The system then was pretty much the same as it is now –you put together your resume to sell yourself, you sent it off and, if invited, went for an interview. In short, you had to take the initiative and the teacher or school had all the power. Here it is just the opposite. Jesus goes out into the world and takes the initiative to call the disciple. It is the one invited who has all the power to say yes or no to the invitation. If you look at all the discipleship stories in the Gospels, you will note that in those situations where an individual approached Jesus to ask to be a disciple (for example the story of the rich young man) the result was failure. Perhaps

it was because they approached Jesus on their own terms or with their own agenda, rather than the other way around.

Another unusual aspect of the call of Matthew is that he is a tax collector sitting in his tax booth collecting taxes on goods as they moved in and out of town. Chances are Matthew was probably universally hated. The religious Pharisees would despise him because he was religiously impure because he dealt with gentiles and handled Roman money. The nationalist Jews would hate him because he was collaborating with the hated Romans who occupied their country by collecting the taxes that supported the invading Roman army. The rich merchants would hate him because he cut into their profit margins and the poor would hate him because he only made their already hard lives all the more difficult. Matthew was a most unlikely disciple to call if Jesus' purpose was to "sell" his ministry to the people.

The Pharisees later see Jesus eating dinner in the house. They note the sinners and tax collectors who came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. We don't know whose house, but we know dinners in 1st century Palestine were semi-public events. People could come in and sit along the wall and listen to the discussion with the guest of honor. The Pharisees approach the disciples and ask why their teacher would eat with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus, overhearing these remarks, distinguishes his ministry from theirs: unlike them, his purpose is not to maintain his own cultic purity and good social and religious reputation; his ministry is one of reconciliation and healing. In short, his ministry is other directed rather than self directed.

In doing so, Jesus quotes from the prophet Hosea; "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." The Book of Hosea is set in the period of the Northern Kingdom of Israel

during a time of prosperity when all the religious sacrifices were made to God but, in fact, the society was one based on greed and injustice. The Prophet Hosea spoke for God in reminding the people that all the sacrifices in the world do not replace the loving relationship God desires with God's people.

I think there are a couple of lessons in these readings that we should reflect upon in these times. The first is that Jesus was out to do the work God sent him to do – and that was not to sell a product but to reconcile people with God and, thus, with one another. He was not about to be distracted by the Pharisee's criticism or by their agenda. In studying church history in seminary, I found that the Church seems to go off the tracks at times when it is currying favor or power. It is at its best and most creative during the great reform periods – like the desert fathers and mothers in the 5th century or the times of St. Francis Assisi.

The second is that it is God who gets to do the calling. Have you noticed that when we humans do the choosing, the people chosen are almost invariably people just like the ones who are doing the choosing? In fact, the rules are usually written not only to ensure this result but also to limit who gets to do the choosing to in order to insure that this result will continue. Think about it. There weren't any women senators or judges until women got the vote and that wasn't until the early 20th century. We recently had the first person of color and the first woman as candidates for President – it's only been almost 150 years (6 or 7 generations) since the Emancipation Proclamation and 70 years (3 or 4 generations) since women got the vote! And let's not congratulate ourselves too much about the progress of women and people of color in our society. A quick look at the Congress or corporate boards or the Primates and bishops in our own Anglican Communion will give a much better picture

of those who are still making the rules about who gets chosen. God, it seems, sometimes has different ideas and keeps the right to choose to God's self.

Lastly, God doesn't seem to be nearly as impressed by our religiosity or purity as we seem to be. In fact, God seems to much prefer, as expressed in the Book of Micah, that we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

God started our faith history by choosing Abram – and Abram said yes. God chose Matthew – and Matthew said yes. When I was a child I was taught that Heaven was filled with good people. Sixty years of life and some time spent closely reading the stories in the Bible have taught me that that isn't true! Heaven is filled with imperfect and broken people just like us who said “yes” when God called them.

Amen.