

### ***Who's Calling?***

Well, it feels kind of strange to be up here - and in this get-up that used to be so familiar. Truth is I've preached only once since I retired in 2012. So, I hope you will forgive me if I'm a little rusty!

I bring you greetings today from my employer - the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, generally known as the GTU. I also bring greetings from our UCC seminary, PSR, which is one of eight Christian seminaries in the GTU - everything from Roman Catholic to Unitarian: Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopalian.

And the GTU is not only ecumenical, it's also interreligious. We have a Center for Jewish Studies, and a Center for Islamic Studies. We have a Buddhist Institute and a Greek Orthodox Institute. We also have something brand new, something I've been very involved in; namely, the GTU Center for Hindu Studies. Just this month we brought in our first professor of Hinduism.

All in all, the GTU is the largest and the most comprehensive center for graduate theological education in North America, with more than 1000 students, including more than 200 Ph.D. students.

Perched on a hill overlooking the campus of UC Berkeley, the Graduate Theological Union - which is also known as "Holy Hill" -- is a remarkable place, filled with bright, thoughtful, faithful people.

Now, I have to admit, I am a bit partial! I was a GTU student myself - got my PhD there. I've been a professor there; and, I served on the Board of Trustees for 9 years. So, once I retired from parish ministry, when the President of the GTU asked me if I'd be willing to step in for awhile as interim Vice-President for Advancement, I agreed - with the stipulation that I would do it for a few months, and part-time.

Well, that was 2 years ago now. I am no longer the interim - although I'm still only willing to work half-time, so that I can at least be semi-retired.

But I had no idea how much I would enjoy this job - and enjoy working with Muslims, Jews, and Hindus. My job, you see, includes fundraising, publications, promotional materials, the website, and helping to develop new programs and new partnerships. And so I've had to really get to know and understand all these different religions. And that's been a lot of fun - for I have discovered that there is a lot to be admired in each faith tradition.

The fact is, I could be a Jew. I could be a Buddhist. And I could be a Muslim - well, maybe. I mean, for all that I love and admire my Muslim friends, I'm not sure that I would be disciplined enough to be down on my knees praying 5 times every day; nor am I sure I'd make it through Ramadan.

Maybe I could even be a Hindu. Although, that's more of a stretch, since Hinduism has always seemed to me such a strange and exotic religion - with all those different gods, and outlandish festivals.

However, now that I have a number of Hindu friends, and I've spent a lot of time talking with them about their faith, I have discovered that Hinduism actually has quite a lot in common with my own Christian faith.

For instance, in spite of Krishna, Shiva, Vishnu, Ganesh, and all the rest of their gods - Hindus actually believe in one Supreme Being, who is immanent; that is, present in all of creation, present in every human being and present in every living thing; while at the same time this Divine Being is also transcendent, and mysterious.

And this view is actually pretty similar to a Christian theology of God.

But that still leaves all those strange gods and gurus. Now, when I asked my Hindu friend Kalyan about all the gods, he just smiled, and referred me to the old Hindu parable of the six blind men and the elephant.

You remember the story. Six blind men encounter an elephant for the first time. One reaches out and wraps his arms around the elephant's leg and says, "An elephant is like a tree." Another runs his hand along the broad side and says, "An elephant is like a wall." Another grabs hold of the squirming trunk and says, "An elephant is like a snake." One grabs the tail and says, "An elephant is like a rope." Another takes hold of the ear, and says, "An elephant is like a fan." And the sixth man takes hold of the tusk and says, "An elephant is like a spear."

And the point is that what each person says is accurate. Their experience is true, yes; but it is also limited. No one person sees the whole.

My friend says, "That's Hinduism in a nutshell. It's a religion that is built on the premise that each of us has our own experience of the Divine Mystery, and it may well be true, but it is only a limited view."

And so it follows that there are going to be many different understandings, many methods of devotion, many different gods, many different pathways, and a multitude of spiritual practices.

For a Hindu, if you follow one god and I follow another, it's no problem. If you believe one thing and I believe something else, so what? As long as your devotional practice helps you on your path; then I'm all for it. Because we both understand that neither one of us has the whole truth.

That's why Hindus are so tolerant of other faiths. It's because they understand that no one faith, including their own, has all the answers, nor is it the only pathway to salvation.

Now, I don't know about you, but for me, this resonates pretty strongly with my own open-minded, progressive type of Christianity. The sense of humility about one's own faith perspective sounds really good to me. Maybe I could be a Hindu. Or a Muslim. Or a Jew. Or a Buddhist. They all have their strong points.

But now, you see, I have a problem. I mean, learning to appreciate all these different religions, and seeing the similarities with my own faith is wonderful, but it does lead me to a fundamental question. Namely: How is Christianity different? What makes my religion unique?

We could start with Jesus, of course, except that my Hindu friends have no problem with him. Some even claim Jesus, saying that he is an avatar of Lord Vishnu. Therefore, they say, every Christian church is also a Hindu Temple – which is lovely.

And, as far as my Jewish friends and my Muslim friends, I find that they readily acknowledge Jesus as a great teacher, while denying the divinity of Christ.

But then, come to think of it, the "divinity of Christ" is something I stumble over myself. Maybe you do, too. Was Jesus God? I'm not sure how to answer that.

So, again, I have to ask myself, what distinguishes Christianity? I mean, these other religions speak of love and caring for others. They all emphasize peace. They all call for justice. How is Christianity different? What makes our religion special and unique?

Well, no doubt there are many answers to that question. If there are 70 people here this morning, we may well have 70 different opinions. I mean, we are Congregationalists, after all!

But let me tell you what jumps out at me. My experience is that we Christians have a uniquely strong belief in call, in vocation. In other words, to a far greater extent than I

have seen in other religions, we who follow Jesus have a finely-honed sense of responsibility to make something of our lives. We believe that God calls us to make the world a better place.

We who are Christians tend to believe that Jesus calls us still, like he called those first disciples, to help make God's love visible on the earth.

In fact, one of the last things that Rev. Nancy said to us from this pulpit, at the end of the service last Sunday, was that "God calls us to share our gifts with others, and to share our love."

And that can take many forms. Martin Luther King Jr. was just 26 years old when he was called into leadership of the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. This was not what he expected, not what he was looking for. But... he answered the call. And he changed the world.

Not everyone is called to be a Martin Luther King. But no matter what it might be, for a person to have a calling, and to follow that calling, is a beautiful thing: make no mistake about it. After all, as Frederick Buechner put it, "The place God calls you to is the place where your own deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Lovely.

The trouble is, that it's not always clear to us what our calling is; and even if it is, it's not always possible for us to follow it.

The poet Mary Oliver poses the question, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Dear friend, what are you doing with your one life, and with all the talents and opportunities you have been given?

For many of us, it's a haunting question.

The story that Veda read to us today, about Samuel and Eli, is an ancient story, but it still rings true. Because I think we all have some experience of a voice calling to us in the night. Or maybe it's more like a whisper in our souls. Or maybe it's like a nudge that lies just below the level of consciousness.

My guess is that Rev Nancy heard that voice, or felt that nudge, calling her out of her comfort zone, calling her to leave a place where she was beloved, and instead to follow a faint voice, a holy restlessness in her soul, to a place she knows not where.

Indeed, I want to suggest to you today that we are -- each one us -- Samuel: called to, by the Holy One. We may try to ignore it and go back to sleep -- but there it comes again, calling to us: "Samuel, Samuel!" Or "Elizabeth!" "David!" "Stephanie!" "Alan!"

A voice calls our name, and wants something of us.

In the story, God repeatedly calls Samuel during the night, and each time Samuel gets up and goes to Eli to ask what he wants. And each time Eli says, "I didn't call you. Go back to sleep."

But eventually, wise old Eli figures out what is going on. He tells Samuel, "It's not me calling you. And it's not just the wind rustling in the trees, or a bad dream, or something you ate. No. It is the Mystery of Mysteries. It is God calling you. It is the Universe calling to you, asking something of you."

Eli then advises Samuel on how to respond the next time, and to be ready to listen to what the Lord wants of him. So Samuel does this - and from that moment, his whole life unfolds.

Now, I want to suggest that we all need an Eli in our lives, helping us to figure out what's happening and who's calling. We need Eli, helping us to tell the voice of God from the wind rustling in the trees; helping us discern whether it might indeed be the Holy Spirit nudging us to action; and helping us figure out which of the many voices clamoring for our attention is the One Voice that we should pay attention to.

A pastor can be Eli for us, or a teacher, a friend, a spouse, a parent.

But I what I especially want to say to you today is that this is what the church is for. In our life together, we are Eli for each other. We help each other discern what our lives are about and what God may be calling us to do.

Now, occasionally, we may do this directly. But mostly what I'm talking about are all the indirect ways we affect each other throughout our life together in the church.

We model out behaviors for each other, we work together, we learn from each other, we share our sorrows and our joys. And the whole time, as we walk this journey together, we are helping one another figure out how to make the most of this one wild and precious life we have been given.

Maybe your calling is to be the best Grandpa you can be. (I'm pretty sure that's part of mine). Maybe it's to be the best spouse, or the best cook. Maybe you're called to be the best salesperson, or the best church moderator you can be. Maybe it's a new career. Maybe it's learning how to grow old with grace and good humor. Maybe it's going off to an Indian reservation or a foreign country and allowing your cozy worldview to be dislodged. Maybe it's helping an aging parent. Maybe it's making beautiful music. Or art. Or poetry.

Oh, dear Samuel, I don't know what voices may be calling to you in the night, or what possibilities and yearnings may be stirring in your soul. But what I do know is that Eli lives here, in our life together in this church, and is ready to help each of us discern who is calling, and how to respond.

So. Dear friends, may we truly be open to each other, and open to the leading of the Spirit; so that when God calls, we can say, "Here I am. Send me."