

January 28, 2015

Under the Fig Tree

I Sam. 3:1-10; Psalm, 139:1-12, 23-24; John 1:43-51

Sarah Jackson Shelton and Elizabeth Mangham Lott

preached at Baptist Church of the Covenant

conclusion of retreat weekend with St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Elizabeth: We have done a lot of church this weekend!

Sarah: Hasn't it been great?

Elizabeth: You really are a church nerd, aren't you?

Sarah: It takes one to know one. I can't help it. My parents would go to meetings at church, and I would tag along. It was my favorite place to be. I knew where every bottle of glue and pipe cleaner was stored. My favorite thing to do, however, was to wander from classroom to classroom and look at the art work.

Elizabeth: Which picture was your favorite?

Sarah: It was in the Beginners 3 Sunday School room (that translates into the five year old class these days). There was a sepia print of a little boy. His brown eyes were looking up into a light, and he had brown curly hair. He is clearly in a night shirt, so something has disturbed his rest, but his face is perfectly peaceful.

Elizabeth: I'm guessing it was Samuel.

Sarah: Yes, it is one of my favorite stories. Samuel is left by his mother Hannah to fulfill her promise to God that if God would give her a son, then she would have him mentored for ministry by the old prophet Eli. Samuel sleeps in the same room as the Ark of the Covenant. It is there, surrounded by holy writ, that he hears someone call to him in the middle of the night. It is only logical that he thinks it is Eli – blind, old Eli -- but in going to him, Eli denies calling Samuel and sends him back to bed. This happens three times before even Eli, this man experienced in the ways of the Lord, realizes what is going on. He tells Samuel that should it happen again, he should say, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth." So when the voice comes again, Samuel receives a word from the Lord.

Elizabeth: This is a story of calling. How does it relate to your own call to ministry?

Sarah: Well, I too was on the cradle roll. I had parents who surrounded me with appreciation for the work of the church, at which I heard and memorized holy writ. While I can't recall an audible voice, as an entering freshman at the University of Alabama, I did know the assurance of responding to inner nudges and yearnings with "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth." I don't think God had to pursue me as if to win me over. I was willing to follow this ever-present God. Like many who are raised in the church, I can't recall a time when I did not know about God (and in the words of Emily Dickinson) felt that God was consistently fumbling at my spirit. What about you?

Elizabeth: I grew up in the church, too, though sometimes I think I was just as influenced by the Christ-haunted South (as Flannery O'Connor put it) as I was the teachings of my Baptist church; equal parts cultural myth and good theology. I was in middle school when I first started to link following Jesus with serving in the ministry of the church. I have worked rather unsuccessfully to disentangle those two things for many years. More than once I have thought that it would not be such a bad life to sit underneath the fig tree where Jesus first saw Nathanael.

Nathanael isn't looking for Jesus. He isn't asking for his life to be transformed. If anything, he is skeptical that his friend Philip surprises him or impresses him through this introduction of "Come and see." These are dangerous words in John's gospel. When you "come and see" you are just as likely to discover something about yourself as you are to discover who Jesus is. It's dangerous because you can't unlink that knowledge. You can't unlink the truth of who you are in God's plans and God's way. You can't unlink the truth that you are a child of God, made in God's image, designed for a purpose. And then you can't unlink your life from the lives of all of the others who have "come and seen" because you have begun to figure out together that living into the fullness of who you were each created to be will ultimately bring about the flourishing of all things and all people. That's what happens when Jesus sees you and you see him.

Sarah: When did you start to figure out that you can't "unlink" your call to follow Jesus and your call to serve the church?

Elizabeth: Well, a lot of that initial work happened here. Baptist Church of the Covenant has been a home place for me for almost 17 years. I have tried valiantly in those years to NOT end up in parish ministry. I left after working here in my early 20s to work at the Five Points YMCA. Good work, great mission. I thought maybe I could get away with that being my ministry. But I was miserable and knew on some level that I was hiding there. I stopped by the Covenant office one day without knowing who would be here. I guess I needed a visit with people who knew me. One friend saw me and jokingly asked, "Hey! Do you want a job?" And I surprised myself with, "Yes!"

“Saintly” Sarah Wilson started chanting, “God sent you here! God sent you here!” Turns out Covenant was still in the throes of the pastor search process that brought you to them, Sarah. There had been quite a lot of staff turnover, and they were open to hiring an interim associate pastor to keep programs going until their senior pastor was in place. Swiftly, I returned to this place for a life-changing 15 months.

It was during that intentional interim time that you and I rode to Atlanta together. You were preaching at McAfee School of Theology in their weekly chapel service and asked for me to ride along with you. I did not know you well enough back then to know you are strategic and had plans for our time in the car. You asked me dozens of questions before asking about my sense of calling. I still wanted to run. I still wanted to hide. I told you I did not want to be in the forefront but preferred behind-the-scenes ministry work. I don’t think you really believed that. I think you suspected I doubted myself and was afraid of what saying “yes” to God’s call might look like. And so you gave me the option of leading a certain number of Wednesday night services or preaching one sermon and leading one Wednesday night. I chose the “one and one” deal and started with the Wednesday night. When I was done, you looked at me and said, “You’re going to be in the pulpit one day.” And I thought to myself, “You shut your mouth, you crazy woman!” But you called it out in me.

Sarah: I’m not the only one who recognized your gifts. Laity, seminary professors, West-over Baptist Church in Richmond and now St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church. I wonder why we think it is ok to be less than who God created us to be. We cover our ears in the dark refusing to hear God’s call, or we sit satisfactorily under a fig tree convinced that God will never find us there when the psalmist is clear in his assurance that there is no place we can go that the presence of God will not be there. God knows when we sit down and when we rise up. God is present in the dark and the light. God knows our thoughts and God not only searches for us under those fig trees, God guides us.

Elizabeth: That sounds like good news, but it can also be scary. What if we want to hide from God? Or what if we are perfectly content to sit under the fig tree and never respond to any plan that might be God’s? What if we think, “Wasn’t it great when God did that thing one time through us,” and remembering replaces discernment for the *new thing* that might be next?

Sarah: That sort of fear is understandable, however, I think that it underestimates God’s pursuit of us. Think about it: neither you nor I were satisfied until we had our own pulpits from which to preach with congregations that were responsive and supportive. And God kept calling to Samuel, and Jesus was not put off by Nathaniel’s assessment of those who come from Nazareth. The invitations were still there to each of them just as they come consistently to us.

Elizabeth: Anne Lamott describes something similar. She says that her life was falling apart at the seams, and so standing at the door of a little Presbyterian church, she simply said to God "I quit." The singing she heard was all it took to give in to the pushing, nudging and prodding that she had been receiving from God.

Sarah: OK, so God called Samuel to be a prophet. Jesus called Nathaniel to be a disciple. Anne Lamott, couldn't we call her a modern day prophet? And, you and me, we are pastors of churches. Does God's call come only to those who give their lives over to some sort of Christian vocation?

Elizabeth: I believe that God does not just call a few. God has work for all of us to do. Not just clergy, not just prophets, not just missionaries. We are all called to love God and to love our neighbors. For some, that means becoming a clergyperson, but for the vast majority of others it means that law and medicine, business and teaching, farming and politics, music and art, construction and floor mopping, are all just a means to pay the rent so that we are free to practice a true vocation of following the way of Jesus to love and to give our lives away in service.

Sarah: If that is true, then might it also be true of institutions?

Elizabeth: What do you mean?

Sarah: Institutions, like our churches for example, do they also receive a call from God? Are they called to united, purposeful, defining ministries as a collective group of people?

Elizabeth: There's a lot of bad news out there right now for mainline, brick and mortar churches. Top ten list after top ten list tell of why people are leaving the church, why millennials won't go to church with baby boomers, signs your church will close its doors. And some of that news is true. There are some really valid reasons people walk away from toxic, tired, unchanging churches that have forgotten what it means to be the body of Christ.

So I feel like I was ruined forever (in the very best way) by starting my ministerial career at Baptist Church of the Covenant. At 21-years-old, I got to fall in love with this wild, laughing, loving congregation who welcomed all people, asked really great questions. Even when things were far from perfect in BCOC-land, my very first job on a church staff was in a place that embodied the love of God, the way of Christ, the creativity of the Holy Spirit. And I've watched for all of my adult life as this congregation has grown bolder, laughed louder, loved bigger, and ignored every hand-wringing list that says progressive, affirming, robe-wearing, organ-playing congregations are dying out, don't exist, or can't make it. So

yes, I feel like institutions are called to be certain ways in certain contexts with certain ministries.

And while we know the “uniqueness” of Covenant creates distance from some churches, down in New Orleans, we are lonely Baptists; the “B” word conjures up folks who are against a lot of things. Not only do we not have partners in our city, we are constantly educating neighbors and coworkers and curious onlookers as to what kind of Baptists we are. Just like Philip invited Nathanael to “come and see” Jesus for himself, I want my congregation to experience the community of Covenant to know we’re not alone and there is a way to continue being a Baptist presence in honest, life-giving ways. Isn’t it that what this weekend has been about: two institutions learning and growing together in order to be faithful to the call of God! That’s one of the primary reasons I initiated this partnership, but why did you so readily agree?

Sarah: For two reasons, and they are intertwined. One is I believe welcome is solidarity. (Anne Lamott, Small Victories, p. 22) We are glad you are here, and we are with. You are not alone any more. We are not alone any more. We are with one another and this is known in our welcome. Additionally, Elizabeth, you have welcomed me as friend and mentor, and I believe strongly in your gifts and abilities. Your success, in part, is important to Baptist life and it helps to determine the future of the church. Your success makes the Kingdom of God a richer place for us all.

Elizabeth: What about the nature of my people do you sense in regards to calling.

Sarah: It seems to me that St. Charles’ congregation is composed of persons who are well-educated and have experienced enough personal success that they are self-confident as individuals. I sense that they want to be equally confident about their church but that they are hesitant. While I am not sure what that is all about, I have some ideas. For instance, Elizabeth, you are a woman...the only [caucasian] Baptist female pastor in the state of Louisiana of which we know. Even though you have had a great honeymoon, the first year is over and now it is time to get down to brass tacks. While they will never say it to your face, I suspect some in your congregation now wonder about your leadership. Don’t get overly wrought about this. It is a perfectly normal developmental process in the life of a church. I believe that you, Elizabeth, are just the person to lend stability and care to a congregation that isn’t quite sure why you love them so much. I also wonder if financial insecurity creates fear. (I know it does here.) I wonder if St Charles’ identity as the widely respected seminary church has faded into the past and now, they are unsure of who they are and even, of who they want to become. Some may be like Nathaniel and just want to sit under the fig tree, continuing in a state of denial that any changes need to be made. I also wonder if the complex neighborhood demographics create some angst. You may not

be sure who is coming into the church and if you really want them there even though you know you should want them there.

Bottom line: I think you have a congregation full of African Impalas.

Elizabeth: What in the world?

Sarah: Bear with me! The impala has spectacular leaping abilities. They can jump as high as ten feet and as wide as thirty feet. So why do zookeepers place them in pens with walls only three feet tall?

Elizabeth: I have no idea!!!!!!

Sarah: Because an impala will not jump if they cannot see where they are going to land. Even though they can easily clear a three foot high wall, they won't do it. They stay put, because they cannot see what is on the other side. Isn't St. Charles a little like that? Isn't Baptist Church of the Covenant a little like that? ...beautiful creations of God's, wondrously gifted, but if they can't see the other side, the final product, the end result, will they jump over what has them boxed in? Is being stuck – whether in contentment or fear -- a way of running away from the persistent call of God? Can they sit in childlike wonder, in the dark, unafraid and still, and answer God's call with "Speak Lord, for thy servant hears and is willing to do whatever You ask even when we can't see the other side?" What about Covenant, Elizabeth. What are you seeing here?

Elizabeth: This church was born out of the unfinished work of the Civil Rights movement and a willingness to push against injustice. When I arrived in 1998, the church was known for its progressive edge in addressing the AIDS crisis with front-and-center participation in awareness walks and personal care through AIDS care teams. Then the conversation came around welcoming and affirming all people. Covenant was ready to say "yes" to any number of hard questions before many other congregations were ready to even acknowledge the questions were being asked.

I wonder what the next round of questions will be? It can be deeply affirming to know this is who we are because this is who we have been. But scores of new people are joining this church each year, and they weren't part of those stories. So who will Covenant be in the next decade? I wonder what it will mean for Covenant to not just value diversity but become a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, TRULY diverse faith community? What questions need to be asked now? What action needs to be taken? And will it empower you to keep on knowing that another congregation down in New Orleans is praying for your courage?

Sarah: Absolutely! This faith of ours is not meant to be a solo journey. Just like Philip invited Nathaniel to meet Jesus, just like Eli invited Samuel to listen, so our encounters with one another will continue to bring others into divine presence. Michael Rogness says, our texts for today remind us how it works. "The Christian faith is passed from person to person...People meet Jesus, and they are changed. Whatever their deepest need was, Jesus meets it. Then they tell others what happened. And that's how it has worked ever since. One person says to another, 'I follow Jesus and invite you to do so too.'"

EML: So the way forward is relational; not an ad campaign, not a magic bullet, but relationships, lives, stories, communities. It's saying...Let me tell you about the way my life has been shaped by Jesus. Let me tell you about these people who have been Jesus to me. Let me tell you about the time when I was sitting beneath a fig tree all by myself and thought I might never be understood or noticed or remembered, but Jesus saw me. Let me tell you about this time that I was sitting in the dark, afraid, but God used these people to draw me out of hiding and toward my best, fullest self.

Sarah: Yes, this is how faith happens. God speaks our names in the darkness. Christ spies us under a fig tree, and others, like Philip with Nathanael, are instrumental in sharing their stories of faith so that no matter how long it takes, we respond in faith, with trust, out of love and speak a "yes" to God.

Will you say "yes?"

The time of commitment provides an opportunity for any person to respond to God's call to be a believer, to become a member of this church, to give their life to a full-time Christian vocation as we stand to sing, "Hark, the Voice of Jesus Calling," number 591.