

PROPER 9, YEAR B (RCL), July 5, 2009
Good Shepherd, Berkeley
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2 Samuel 5:15; 9-10
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
Mark 6:1-13

I'll begin with some self-disclosure. But don't worry – it won't be nearly as much as what we've been hearing from Gov. Mark Sanford (and probably not as titillating).

It's just this: I'm basically an introvert, and a fairly committed one at that. Most people find this a bit surprising because I manage to do extroverted things pretty well. Like most introverts, however, I can do that for only so long before I collapse into a heap, in desperate need of recharging my batteries.

This past academic year was a busy one for me as I lurched from one extroverted moment to the next; so I'm pretty worn out, and I'm looking forward to some time off this summer to replenish those storehouses of energy.

I mention all this because it seems to me there might be some analogies to draw between what I just described about my own life and the life of this congregation of the Good Shepherd. I couldn't help but read this morning's biblical texts through that lens. So I want to suggest three of the ways those connections occurred to me. And I offer this as just one among contributions so many of us are making to the work we're currently doing to create a congregational profile in preparation for calling a new vicar.

First, I think this congregation generally sits on the introverted side of the scale. I don't mean that every member here is an introvert – that's clearly not the case. But overall, we seem to be rather self-reflective and not very likely to pick up a megaphone on a street corner.

Generally introverted communities, just like generally introverted individuals, tend to focus their energy inward rather than outward. There's nothing wrong with that, of course. But as we think about future clergy leadership here, we might think about someone who can draw us out of ourselves a bit more and tap into that energy.

We heard a little bit about leadership in the snippet from second Samuel this morning as David becomes King over Israel. I think it's worth noting a few of the wider contextual bits for this passage in relation to our own leadership search. An obvious one springs to mind in the image of a simple shepherd boy slaying that mighty giant, Goliath. We may be a small congregation, but we've faced gigantic challenges in the past; we can do it again.

Okay, that's a little too obvious a bit hokey. There are less obvious but more interesting connections to make here.

As you may recall, whether Israel should have a king at all was a matter of some controversy. Yet the people kept insisting they wanted one, in part, so they could be just like all the other powerful kingdoms in the region. You might also recall that David was not exactly a likely candidate for the role. When Samuel first surveyed Jesse's sons, all the likely ones were presented first until finally Jesse dragged out the least likely – that would be David.

We have a history here at Good Shepherd of not being or even wanting to be like all the other congregations, either in this diocese or ones we've known elsewhere. We've also adopted some rather unusual if not unlikely leadership models here. Now none of this maps neatly to biblical stories, to be sure. But I do think it can be helpful to notice what we can learn from those stories about matching the character of a given community to the kind of leadership it not only wants but also *needs*. Who will help

us be the kind of people God is calling us to be? Not merely who will make us feel comfortable with who we already are, but maybe something of an unlikely choice to move us into a thriving future.

A second connection: This congregation may not be exhausted, but I do think our batteries need some re-charging. We have been working hard during this interim period. Many of us have picked up pieces of our common life that needed attention, or taken on various jobs we haven't done before. Like every congregation, introverted or not, and like every person, over-worked or not, we need to tap deep wells of energy to keep doing the work God has given us to do.

That energy will come, in part, from vision. What kind of vision keeps us coming back here and how do we articulate that vision for others? That's part of the work we're doing right now with our house meetings as we prepare the congregational profile. But I'm not talking here about a strategy for fund-raising or a church-growth plan. Those things are obviously important, but they require the energy of vision to sustain them over time – and vision isn't always easy to articulate.

Paul had a vision – or wait, that was someone else, or... What in the world is Paul talking about in that passage from his second letter to the Corinthians?

Here's my paraphrase of that strange passage: "Someone, well, a friend – yeah, that's it, a friend of mine had this really trippy experience. All wiggled out and didn't know what to make of it. You know, the real knock-your-socks-off kind of life-changing thing. But I didn't want – I mean he didn't want to make a big deal out of it, because it's not really about me – I mean him. I mean, oh, okay. It really was me, and I can't help but talk about it, but that's not really the point, the point is Christ, okay?"

Whether or not Paul was writing about himself here, I think he did a pretty lousy job of describing why this vision mattered, and if it didn't, why mention it at all? He did manage, though, to make this much clear: There's nothing particularly special about him that anyone should notice; it's only the grace of God-in-Christ that matters. That's the vision that sustained him and enabled him to do the work he did. Because of that grace, he says, when I'm weak, I'm strong.

Here at Good Shepherd we can at times worry about apparent weaknesses – a small budget, few members, a challenging parish hall, and so on. Paul would encourage us to find in those moments an occasion to renew our vision of divine grace, and I would say especially to find new and fresh ways to talk about it and share it.

Where have you caught visions of God's generosity? How has it changed your life? You wouldn't be sitting here this morning at all if your life hadn't been changed by some kind of vision. So why does it matter? What kind of clergy leadership will help us articulate that vision?

Third and finally, my time off this summer will be spent mostly by taking what some people these days are calling a "staycation." I'll travel only a little bit and will instead spend more time in my own backyard, which I happen to enjoy quite a lot. Here at Good Shepherd, our own "backyard" (metaphorically speaking) is also quite rich. We're brimming over here with musical, intellectual, spiritual, and practical talent and in some rather astonishing ways.

That's what the people in Jesus' hometown of Nazareth couldn't quite fathom, as we heard from Mark's gospel this morning. They knew Jesus and his family just a little too well. They couldn't really believe that one of their own had something to teach them. In contrast to that, I think we do a pretty good job here in this congregation of appreciating our own homegrown skills and the many talents that God has brought our way over the years. Yet I also think that comes with a note of caution.

Congregations, just like small hometowns, always run the risk of insularity. It can mean, like it did in Nazareth, not being able to see the gifts in your own backyard. Insularity can also make a community deeply suspicious of outsiders, of all those many gifts that might be across the fence in a

neighbor's yard, or it might lead to hoarding those gifts rather than sharing them. Let's remember the first thing Jesus did when faced with Nazarene insularity – he sent his disciples out to the surrounding villages to share their gifts with others.

We could take this July 4th weekend, this celebration of “Independence Day,” as an occasion to reflect on that cautionary note.

There's a lot about this congregation, both in its history and today, that resonates well with “independence.” We have, shall we say, some rather established opinions about how things ought to be done and we're not terribly keen on the idea of a diocese or a national church or a worldwide Anglican Communion telling us differently.

Actually, that's more generally true about the Episcopal Church as whole, which helps to explain the rocky road we've been traveling with other provinces in the Communion.

I think it's important in that regard to recognize a difference between “independence” and “isolation.” The rockiness of the road we've been traveling as Episcopalians would have been made much smoother if we had just severed entirely our ties with the rest of the Anglican world and isolated ourselves from all those other peculiar Anglican locales (okay, except maybe Canada and New Zealand). Some have called for precisely that, but most haven't. And I would say for good reason.

As Episcopalians, including many of us in this congregation, we value our ties to the wider Christian world. But those ties are not at all easy to maintain. Discerning and then negotiating how to be “in communion” with others without also giving up our own insights is of course the vexing challenge facing the worldwide Anglican Communion today – and this will certainly be discussed at great length during General Convention, which is happening in Anaheim right now.

Independent but not isolated; tapping backyard resources while also looking for previously unimagined ones; refreshing the vision of God's grace in Christ and finding ever better ways to articulate it; nurturing the richness of an interior life with a view toward sharing it with others – that's what I'm aiming for in my own life right now. I think it also describes some of our communal aspirations as a congregation.

We might also remember in the weeks and months ahead that we're not alone in facing this kind of moment. Ancient Israelites, disciples of Jesus, Paul, Christians in Corinth – all of them have blazed these trails before us, sometimes well and sometimes not so well. And all of them belong to that great “cloud of witnesses” making the journey with us.

Let's also remember that like all of them, God is making the journey with us, too, which we remember and celebrate every week at this table.

Of course, there's more than one way to think about what we find here at the Eucharistic table: food for the journey; strength in weakness; comfort in affliction; visions of grace. These days, I liken this table to having some juice and cookies in kindergarten before taking a good nap. That, too, is a vision of divine grace...