

Please be seated.

Today's Gospel is one of Calling – the calling of the first four disciples, including our own patron, St. Andrew. The word “calling” is one that is heard frequently in religious settings, and implies the voice of God reaching a person in a way that makes it clear what God desires for that individual. It is especially appropriate in an occupational setting, as it is essentially the Old English-slash-Teutonic equivalent for the Latin-derived “Vocation.” The Latin word “vocare” is “to call,” and you can see its relation to the English word “voice.”

I have often described my role as Choirmaster here at St. Andrew's as a “calling,” as I have always felt it to be the most authentic expression of my inner self of anything that I have ever done. I cannot say that I have ever explicitly heard the voice of God in this calling; but, if the voice of God can be interpreted as that which is of ultimate concern to someone – as the interaction of sacred music with ceremonial is to me – then I believe it to be a genuine calling.

But beyond a personal calling, I believe that there is such a thing as a corporate calling – the calling of a community. This can be at any level, from the community of two individuals united in partnership, to the community of a people, a nation, or even a species. And I believe that there is a certain calling for Christians that may surprise you. Many Christians feel called to personal spirituality – what one might call an individual's relationship [vertical gesture] with the Divine, which is supported by the words of prophets and sages, rabbis and pastors, throughout Scripture and the Christian experience. Many Christians feel called to social justice – what one might call one's relationship [horizontal gesture] to others, and the strength of this calling is bolstered by the number of references to this responsibility throughout Scripture, both Judaic and Christian. But I think there is a third calling,

perhaps a calling that unites them both in spirit. And that calling is, simply put, SONG. Let me explain.

Judaism appears distinctive among ancient Western religions in its emphasis on singing. In the Qu'uran, for instance, music is mentioned only twice, according to a source I looked into for this sermon, and it is mentioned with suspicion, advising Muslims to approach music carefully and with skepticism, because it is apt to mislead one into sensual pleasures. But the Hebrew Scriptures are full of accounts of singing, from angels to humans, and even in a poetic passage in the Book of Job, to the morning stars and all the Sons of God, who essentially sing the world into being. And even more pointedly, the Hebrew Scriptures – especially the Psalms – are full of admonitions to sing and make music as the principal way of praising God – a trait inherited by Christians and the Christian scriptures. The Divine command to sing appears more often in the Bible than any other admonition, with the possible exception of “Be not afraid.”

So would you not think that God is trying to tell us something here, if it is so pervasive and unambiguously stated? I contend that there is a very clear Divine call on all Christians to sing – to sing God's praises, yes, but also simply to sing for joy – to exult at our very existence – to give thanks in an audible and delightful way. And conversely to sing out our grief – to lament audibly and poignantly, and give voice to our sorrows, “in groanings too deep for words,” as St. Paul says.<sup>b</sup>

I think there are fundamental, basic human needs that are literally given utterance through singing. And the divine admonition to sing is God's way of giving voice to this otherwise inexpressible part of our essence. It is, in fact, therapeutic, and a gift from God. You may not agree with this, but I believe this to be just as essential and necessary, perhaps even imperative, to us as Christians as personal spirituality and social justice, and links them to each other in a profound way.

“But what about me?” some of you are thinking. “I’m a lousy singer. No one wants to hear me sing.” And my response is twofold – 1) Sorry, you don’t have a choice when it is such a clear command; but, more importantly, 2) It doesn’t matter what you sound like. The therapeutic nature of singing is not proportionate to the beauty of that singing, just that it takes place. And essentially you’re not singing for anyone else around you, but for yourself and for God. So I encourage you to rid yourself of any inhibitions you might have and let your voice soar, or roar, if that’s a better description; or even squeak.

I remember when my mother’s dementia was in its initial stages, her capacity to read or remember the words to hymns was diminishing; but this did not inhibit her from singing along joyfully on “ah,” wordlessly joining the throng, and thereby giving voice to her joy with no less authenticity or power than those of us who were singing the right words. She did herself a great good by not being embarrassed or inhibited, and God was fittingly praised.

One of the dangers that churches with excellent choirs run is the pitfall of comparisons. When there are persons in our midst whose singing is deemed beautiful, and which we encourage them to do either on behalf of all, as in an anthem, or in support of everyone, as in a hymn – there is sometimes a tendency for those with voices that are less well-trained, or that we deem less beautiful, to recede in deference or embarrassment. I want to state unequivocally that I want to denounce and eradicate any such tendency at St. Andrew’s. You may not be choir material, but that does not reduce your responsibility – and privilege – of singing God’s praises, and letting your spirit commune with the Holy Spirit through this gift of vocal expression.

So I encourage you to abandon fear; ignore embarrassment; eschew hesitance; and SING. It would be my greatest joy if, as we begin to

prepare a parish profile with a new rector in view, that we not only define ourselves as a parish with excellent music – but that we also define ourselves as a community that sings exuberantly – everyone, collectively, together, boisterously, raising the rafters when joyful, and chanting mournfully when grieving. I hope and pray that this might be seen as one of our callings as a community.

Amen.