

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on January 24, 2021.

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE: VOCATION

And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. Mark 1:17-18

**The wounded from the battle-plain,
In dreary hospitals of pain,
The cheerless corridors,
The cold and stony floors.**

**Lo! in that house of misery
A lady with a lamp I see
Pass through the glimmering gloom,
And flit from room to room.**

These words come from a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. They were written in honor of the service that Florence Nightingale performed caring for troops during the Crimean War. She is our luminary for today.

Florence Nightingale was one of the towering figures of the 19th century. She almost single handedly transformed hospital care, increased public sanitization and created the profession of nursing.

In the days before her work, military and public hospitals were awful places. In wartime more soldiers would die in the hospitals from disease and mistreatment than from their wounds. The women who cared for the sick received almost no training. They usually showed very little compassion. The smells of the institutions caused many of the nurses to use gin to cope with the situation. The reputation of nurses in the first part of the 19th century were as drunks with questionable virtue.

By the end of Florence's life this was all turned around. There were numerous institutions that trained nurses to care for patients. Nursing came to be seen as a noble profession. It became more acceptable for females to follow this vocation.

Florence Nightingale was not only a woman of compassion who treated individuals with care. She was a natural born statistician and administrator. She understood the importance of sanitation, procedures, best practices and supply chains.

She knew how to use political influence to make things happen. She came to know Queen Victoria and her ministers. She is one of the handful of people who convinced political leaders that the government must play a role in public health.

These are some of her accomplishments and why she is well worth remembering. But the reason we have chose her to be one of our luminaries is her sense of vocation. How did Florence Nightingale become the lady with the lamp?

She was born in 1820 while her British parents were vacationing in Italy. She was named for the city of her birth, Florence. Her family had a very secure position in society. Her father had inherited two large estates which provided a very healthy income each year.

Her father had very high standards for education. He could not find a suitable tutor for his two girls. So, he took their education on himself, teaching them Latin, Greek, German, Italian, French, English grammar, philosophy, and history. The girls' governess was allowed to teach them music and drawing.

When she was in her late teens, Florence was presented at court and introduced to society. This meant many parties and travel on the continent. She was fully prepared for the sole responsibility of a female of her class and time. That responsibility was to make a good marriage. A good marriage meant finding a male with a suitable income and status.

Florence was good looking and accomplished. Soon two men fell in love with her and proposed. She turned them down because she was not ready to settle down.

On February 7, 1837 Florence had a mystical experience of God. She tells us **“God spoke to me and called me to His Service. What form this service was to take the voice did not say.”** Her life from that time forward was transformed as she sought to discover what her true vocation might be.

This call at first disturbed her. She felt called but did not know exactly what she was supposed to do. She was at times torn between the expectations of her family to marry and her sense of call. She spent most of her spare time visiting the cottages on her family estate and bringing poor people food and medicine.

Her family forced her to go to London for the season, and while there another suitor asked for the hand in marriage. She liked him, but she could not bring herself to say yes, because she still did not know what her service might entail.

During this time in London her family had visitors from America. They were Julia Ward Howe who would compose the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” and her husband Dr. Howe. Florence asked Dr. Howe, **“Do you think it unsuitable and unbecoming for a young Englishwoman to devote herself to works of charity in hospitals and elsewhere as Catholic sisters do? Do you think it would be a dreadful thing?”** He answered, **“It would be unusual and whatever is unusual in England is unsuitable, but act on your inspiration.”**

During this period, Florence met a Roman Catholic Cardinal named Manning. She shared her calling and wondered if she should become Roman Catholic in order to serve like nuns dedicated to medical mission. The Cardinal told her to remain in the Church of England because she did not accept fully the Catholic doctrine, but he affirmed her mission and service. Some time later he used his influence to have ten nuns join her in Crimea as she began her mission to the soldiers fighting there.

Convinced by her experience of God and the affirmation from others she began to receive the training and education that she needed to allow her to change the lives of so many people. She illumines for us the meaning of vocation.

There are very often two ways Christians are called to service. God can speak directly to our hearts, but he can also speak to us through other human beings. Florence had a direct experience of God's call, but God also spoke through Howe and Cardinal Manning.

In the Bible we find God speaking in both ways. I am not going to deny that God speaks to the heart of individuals. I am sure that many of us have experienced the nudging of the Spirit at some point in our lives. God does speak to us in the silence of meditation, prayer and the reading of Scripture. The still small voice does inform us.

But in the New Testament vocation is more often an active external call. Notice in the Gospels how Jesus gathered his leadership team. Jesus did not just give talks and wait for volunteers to come to him asking to be part of his movement. In our Gospel Lesson for this morning we heard that Jesus went to Galilee and called Peter and Andrew to follow him and he would make them fishers of people. He told James and John to leave their nets and follow. He saw Levi the tax collector and called him to follow him. In almost every case the call was initiated by Jesus and not by the disciple.

I do not believe that Jesus just went around randomly choosing people to be a part of his inner circle. I do not think we are to believe that Jesus did not know the people he called into leadership. Jesus had lived almost thirty years in northern Israel. He had interacted with countless people through the years. They had been his neighbors, he had heard their stories, and he knew their reputations. Jesus was not calling strangers. Jesus gathered a diverse group that would form the early leadership team of the Christian movement.

I believe that the external call is more important than an internal call for one simple reason – most often others can see our potential better than we can. Just think of Jesus' call of Peter. Peter was a fisherman. That was the life he knew. Peter might have had a deepening religious experience. He might have believed he could grow in his faithfulness. But Jesus saw much more. Jesus saw Peter as the rock on which he would build his church. Jesus saw something in Peter that Peter could never imagine.

Just as Florence Nightingale's vocation was affirmed and shaped by others, so often God speaks to us through other human beings. It was twenty years ago this

month that I received a phone call. I had been Pastor in Niagara Falls for 12 years and had no intention of seeking a new call. The phone call was from Lucille Weaver. Lucille was the interim pastor here at Clarence. She had known me a long time. She knew my strengths and weaknesses. So she called to say that she thought I would be a good fit for Clarence. She asked me to send my paperwork to the pastoral nominating committee.

I told her thanks for thinking of me. I was not planning on leaving Riverside anytime soon. I did not have my resume updated, Rachel had just started high school, never mind. Those who remember Lucille know that she was not easily denied. I think it was her third call that finally made me consider that Lucille was speaking for God. I responded and by September I was here.

I am sure that many of you have similar experiences in which words from others on reflection can seem like God's word to you.

I believe that our calls from God come in a variety of ways.

At times we receive an internal call. There are times in prayer when we receive a gentle nudge. There are times when a reading of Scripture causes an insight that leads to action. Sometimes individuals are overwhelmed by the presence of the divine that leads them to a new course of action.

But most of us do not hear a voice from a burning bush
Or see handwriting on a wall
Or have visions in a dream.

Much more common and just as real God's call comes to us through

A telephone call from a member of a nominating committee asking you to serve in some capacity.

Or a nudge from a friend to teach in Christian education or sing in the choir.

Or an invitation from a fellow member to work on a mission project.

You may think of ways you might have been called.

It is the same Jesus who called Peter and Andrew and Florence Nightingale who calls us. The call may come from reading Scripture or in prayer or during worship in the voice of another human being. When we hear this call, all we have to do is say yes.