

## I HAVE CALLED YOU BY NAME

Isaiah 43:1-3a

Leslie Van Blarcom

As you probably know, we are doing a series of sermons identifying and discussing the mentors and influences on the faith formation of your clergy staff at Old Mission. To begin that, I found a conversation with Professor Sondra Matthaei years ago helpful for this assignment.\* Sondra was a Professor of Christian Education at St. Paul School of Theology and the conversation I refer to had to do with the research she was doing on mentoring. She subsequently published a book on Faith Mentoring.\* In our talk, she told me that perhaps the most interesting discovery in her research was that although we tend to think of mentors as long term, on-going relationships in our lives, frequently many of the most important influences on our lives and spiritual formation involve brief relationships – even single conversations – in which we are deeply impacted. These are “right time – right place” encounters when someone tells us the precise thing we need to hear, when we are most able to hear it.

I can recall many “one liners” from either brief or on-going relationships which have greatly influenced my path and remain guiding principles for me. I particularly resonate with the “right time -right place idea”. My favorite one liners reflect both universal truisms for me as well as personal insights about who I am.

My parents, of course, were among the on-going relationships providing me with “words to live by”. First, they both taught me that I was equal to and could potentially do whatever boys do. Then from my father\* such gems as, “leave a room better than you found it” and “other people, Leslie, think about other people”. Related to that, my mother was the one who first taught me that

compassion is solidarity with the suffering of others\* and is at the heart of all religions. She was also the source of my great love for the music of the church.

My husband Cliff continues to point out when my expectations are unrealistic and potentially hurtful and to remind me that I can just say no without explaining myself.\* He has also been an on-going source of unconditional love, loving me “just as I am, without one plea”. My children have helped me learn humility over the years\* and taught me a great deal, because I was so often unsure of the what and the why of what I did with them. A very important one liner for me from a counselor several years ago was “the need to be needed is not a virtue” which continues to be instructive for me. Then teachers, friends and colleagues have helped me believe in my leadership ability and were part of steering me to my vocation – an example being by affirming my skill with one-on-one conversations and my first teacher at St. Paul identifying in me a gift for theology.

I have often been influenced by a book because of a line I retain from it which speaks truth to me: from a book called “Morning Sun on a White Piano”\* came the line “No religion is valid that doesn’t make you a kinder, more loving person” which I strongly believe and often repeat.

Also, it was again my mother who taught me to look for biblical themes, rather than biblical literalism. Early on, I learned that the Bible as a whole reflected love, justice, mercy and outreach to the needy as well as God’s on-going commitment to all of humanity and to the whole creation. The introduction of any new theological idea for me is always tested in terms of its “squaring” with a God of love\*. Because there is sometimes a tendency to distinguish the Old and New Testament as the Old representing the God of Law and the New the God of Love, I

especially wanted to choose an Old Testament passage today because I think God's love is the unifying theme of the entire biblical text. Today's passage is from what is referred to as 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah, scholars believing that there are at least 3 authors to Isaiah and that the 3 sections were written at different times. Second Isaiah was written in a time of national distress and the author is assuring the nation of Israel that God will provide comfort and deliverance. It stresses the redemptive activity of God. The message is really that whatever is necessary to redeem God's people, God will do. "I have called you by name and you are mine" is said to the nation of Israel, but also to all God's people and to us as individuals. It tells us that we were created by God and we all belong to God. That is our source of confidence and hope\*. The message continues "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you – I am the Lord your God, the Holy One, your Savior".

When I was serving at Shawnee UMC, we gave a banner to children being baptized\*. The child's name was printed on the top of it and beneath the name was that verse – I have called you by name and you are mine. I loved that because I so believe that the context from which we all come is that we each came from God and belong to God – and that it is also a call narrative as by our God-given gifts we are each called by God for specific purposes.

I have a new favorite book – it is called Immortal Diamond and is by the well-known Franciscan priest Richard Rohr\*. His premise is that we each have a false self and a true self. The true self is our inherent worthiness, that person God has called us to be, the person who enjoys the anxiety free, secure dignity given to each of us by God.

Our false self is the one that over-reacts to the expectations of the people and culture around us. In my anxious junior high years, a wise teacher told me that there are 2 parts to criticism: the giving of it and the accepting of it. Just because someone tells you something about yourself, doesn't make it true\*. The spiritual writer Kathleen Norris once said, "In every situation, say who am I in this and never blame". That says to me that we can pause upon hearing a critique and assess the truth of what we hear. We often become co-dependent and literally addicted to the opinions of those around us about who we are. As Rohr says, your soul is who you are in God and who God is in you. **Sin** in that context becomes making mistakes about who and whose we are. Says Rohr, "All worldly expectations and self-sacrifice are resentments waiting to happen". Claire Smith\*, a member of our congregation who does spiritual coaching, recently gave me a one-liner which will be added to my list of often repeated thoughts – "Jesus did not respond to need, he responded to the will of God". We are called by name to do just that – respond to God's will for us. Our true confidence and hope comes not from the world around us, but from knowing that we belong to God and will return to God.\* Verse 4 of Isaiah 43 expands on this thought, telling us that God will redeem us because "you are precious in my sight and honored and I love you". God formed us and made us and that is our ultimate identity. In Philippians 1:6, we are reminded of this same thought "He who began a good work in you, will bring it to completion".

Several years ago, I received a scathing letter from an extended family member, responding to my attempt to reconcile a conflict between us. I was really hurt and depressed by her letter's characterization of me. It was my husband Cliff who finally helped me out of my funk by saying, "How much contact have you really

had with this person over the past 30 years?” She doesn’t know you, Leslie – she doesn’t know who you are!” Beyond that anecdote, I hope it is apparent that the influences on my life, particularly my faith life, have been largely positive and helpful. However\*, the questions I want to leave you with this morning as you reflect on the important influences on your life, are: Who do you allow to tell you who you are? Who do you let call you by name? Who defines your true self – your soul? As spiritual writer Parker Palmer says, in the end, we will be judged not on results, but on our faithfulness: faithfulness to our gifts, the needs we saw around us and how we engaged those needs with our God-given gifts. It is my hope for each person here that the context out of which you hear all the influences on you is that you belong first to your Creator and it is your Creator who calls you by name\*, that you know your true self to be the beloved child of God, gifted, redeemed and thus enabled to follow The Holy One’s will for you and your life.

AMEN.