

Last Sunday was the festival of the Baptism of Our Lord and Pastor Amber used the word “disruptive” to describe what the impact of God’s call to us in baptism can feel like. Receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit can and should have a disruptive impact on our lives.

Our readings about the call of Samuel and John’s account of the call of Phillip and Nathanael give more evidence about the disruptive potential of being called by God. They remind me of one of my favorite Doonesbury comic strips. Garry Trudeau loves to needles the church almost as much as he loves needling the government, as this strip shows.

Michael Doonesbury and his wife, Nicole, are sitting in the living room having a little heart-to-heart with their daughter Alex, who is probably about age 7 or 8.

Mike: Alex, hon, mom and I have been talking, and we’ve decided it’s time for us to start attending church as a family...

Alex: Church? Church is BORING!

Mike: Well, we thought you might say that. All kids think that...

Alex: Didn’t YOU think church was boring when you were a kid?

Mike: Well, sure, I hated going. But church was good for me, so my parents made me stick it out. You may end of hating church, too, but you have to come by that feeling honestly. You have to put in the pew time, like mom and I did.

Alex: Oh...What if I like it?

Mike: Like it? (*Mike looks puzzled, as the thought had never occurred to him*) What do you mean?

Nicole: We’ll cross that bridge when we get there, honey.

We come to church and bring our kids to church for lots of different reasons. For the Doonesbury’s, Mike couldn’t come up with any better reason than “my parents made me do it, so I’m going to make you do it.” Another reason some people use is this one that Pastor Will Willimon overheard in an airport. Will was in a waiting area with a large group of people and they watched in horror as an enterprising four-year-old demolished a wing of this large metropolitan airport, turning over trashcans, stepping on an ice cream cone, tracking it all over the seats. His helpless, terrified parents sat watching him in befuddlement. The flight was finally called, saving the building from further destruction. Pastor Willimon overheard the father saying to the mother as they walked by, “Dear, perhaps we ought to consider taking Thomas to Sunday School; maybe that would help.”

Will reports that his inner response was, “Yes, maybe we could help to tame the little pagan in our Sunday school! After all, isn’t that what church is mostly good for? Taming? Subduing? Civilizing?” One of our retired pastors was at worship last evening and told me after worship of the time a father brought his 13-year old daughter to confirmation and said, “I don’t believe in any of this church stuff, but I’ll bring her so you can keep her from getting pregnant.” Many is the parent who has brought his or her child to Sunday School or confirmation thinking the church is a safe place where their kids can get a little dose of religion with some moral instruction on the side. Mike Doonesbury and the father in the airport need to be warned that bringing a child to church is not without its risks.

Take our story about Samuel, for instance. His mother had made a vow and brought him to the holy site of Shiloh, where he helped the old priest Eli. The old priest’s eyes were growing dim and he could use the boy to fetch things for him. And the temple is a good, safe place for a young boy.

The writer comments that “the word of the LORD was rare in those days,” safe from any disruptive, challenging words of God. People could show up at the temple now and then, go through a few prescribed rituals, and feel better about themselves. That was all. Some might say that this is a fitting description of our era, as well as Samuel’s.

Into this situation of settled, silent religion, one night young Samuel hears his name called. Not once, but four times, and the fourth time, when he finally figures out that it is the LORD God speaking to him, he listens and gets quite an earful.

The next morning, Eli wants to know what Samuel heard in the voice of God. Reluctantly at first, but then with Eli's urging, the boy tells what he heard. Samuel says there will be bad times ahead for Eli's family. Eli will be punished because he knew his sons were stealing from the temple offerings and he did nothing to stop it. Samuel grew up to be a great prophet in Israel, and it was he who anointed Saul and David as the first two kings of Israel. His life was changed by a voice in the night.

Samuel's story is similar to the stories of other people of faith, stories about people whose lives are moving along in accustomed, conventional, predictable paths, only to be disrupted by an intrusive word from God, only to hear their name called, and to have their world changed. It happened to Abraham and Sarah, to Moses, to Philip and Nathanael, to Francis of Assisi and Martin Luther, to Martin Luther King, Jr. and to Mother Theresa.

Today's story about Samuel is both a promise and a warning. The promise is that, though in times like ours the "word of the LORD may be rare," God is not forever silent. One night, when we are minding our own business, or one Sunday when we're in church just going through the motions, there is a voice, we hear our name called, and like young Samuel, our world changes. If you don't want to risk such disruption, then you had better avoid hanging around the temple and avoid having your kids hang around the temple.

But God's call is not limited to extraordinary experiences that lead to major disruption, like a vision or a call in the night. More often, God speaks to us quietly in ways we hear only if we are attentive and listen.

Martin Luther once preached a sermon to a congregation that had complained they never heard God's call. Luther urged them to look at the most common instruments of their labors and there they would hear a "call." Luther chided them, "Look at your tools, your needle, your thimble, your beer barrel, your scales, your measures, and you will find this saying written on them...None of the things that you deal with daily are too trifling to tell you this incessantly, if you are but willing to hear...and there is no lack of preaching, for you have as many preachers as there are transactions, commodities, tools, and other implements in your house and estate, and they shout this to your face: 'My dear, use me toward your neighbor as you would want him to act toward you with that which is his.'" (Quoted by Gustav Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*)

The common instruments that call to us today would include a telephone, a computer, a car, the Internet, our financial assets. God calls out to us through them and says, "Use us to benefit your neighbor, just as you would hope someone would reach out to you in your time of need."

These quiet, almost routine ways in which God calls us can be just as disruptive in our lives. You look at your telephone and realize, "I could call my city council member and tell them how important it is to me that the council approve the Cranberry Ridge proposal for affordable housing." and you find your life disrupted by going to a city council meeting. You look at your computer and realize, "I could send a letter or an email to my representative to let them know how important it is to me that children living in poverty have basic health care, or that young people who have lived their entire lives in this country should have a way to become citizens." You look at your schedule and realize, "I guess I do have time to help coordinate the week of Families Moving Forward," and this disruption in your life makes a difference in the lives of a dozen people experiencing homelessness.

God's call, even when it comes to us in routine ways, can be disruptive. There are some churches which have a sign by the door leading to the sanctuary that reads, "Silence please. People at worship." Considering the stories of Samuel and the disciples, maybe the sign we should post is "WARNING: God at work. Enter at your own risk."