

Homily for January 14/15, 2012

I feel as if I am a kindred spirit to Samuel in our first reading for today, and I often think of Andrew in the Gospel reading. We may not remember the apostle Andrew because so little is said about him in the Bible, but we certainly remember his brother, Peter, the greatest of the apostles. It was Andrew, as we just heard, who brought his brother to Jesus. The experiences that we heard in the Scripture today cause me to review my own life, and I trust that something of my experience may bring you to a new and a closer relationship with our Lord Jesus and an openness to his call to you.

As many of you know, I did not grow up in the Catholic faith. I grew up in rural Mississippi on the land that was settled by my great-great-great grandparents in the 1840's, when they were in their sixties and their son, my great-great grandfather, was in his thirties. My great grandparents were among the founders of the Baptist church in which I grew up. The only churches in that area were Protestant churches, and most of my family did not attend church at all. No one in the area was Catholic; in fact, when I left home to go to college when I was eighteen years old, I had met only one Catholic.

From my teen-age years and perhaps earlier I was convinced that God was calling me to do something. I had no idea what. The statement in the first reading, "Samuel was not familiar with the Lord, because the Lord had not revealed anything to him yet," has a personal meaning for me. I did not, of course, know the Lord Jesus as I have now come to know him, but like the young Samuel, I heard the Lord calling me. I did not hear him call aloud, as Samuel did, but I heard him, nevertheless, and I had no doubt that it was the Lord who was calling me.

It never occurred to me that the Lord would call me to do anything of any importance because I always remembered my grandfather's words. I used to follow my grandfather as he plowed his fields, walking behind him as he walked behind the mule that pulled his hand-held plow. I remember my grandfather saying to me: "Son, I don't know any McCully who has ever done anything great or wonderful, but we have always been good common people; we pay our debts."

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Like Samuel responding in the dark to the Lord whom he hardly knew, I too said, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” And I listened and I listened, but I heard no response. Yet I knew he was still calling me. I graduated from high school and entered college. I prayed and I waited.

I still did not hear a response until one night when I was on my knees beside my bed in my dormitory room. Since I worked to pay my way through college, I went to bed late. If I lay down in bed to pray, I would fall asleep, so I would kneel on the floor beside my bed to pray. Still sometimes I woke up on the floor because I had fallen asleep.

One night I heard God say, “John, don’t you see: everything that you have heard and experienced tells you that I want you to be a teacher?” And it was as if my life passed before my eyes. From that time on, I have believed that God called me to be a teacher. Thus, after I graduated from college, I entered graduate school with plans to become a teacher. I should also tell you that my wife Ruth and I were married the day we graduated from college and that her father was a Baptist minister, but that is another story.

Ruth and I continued in school even as our children were born. I came to Iowa to teach in the English Department at Iowa State with my degree in medieval studies. My course of studies had taught me a great deal about Catholic doctrine and the history of the Church, which of course is the history of the Catholic Church. Through the years I was in one sense content and yet I heard the Lord still calling me. Always Ruth and I were active members of a Baptist church, yet I taught my children what I had learned in my professional education. As I think of it now, it should not have been surprising that our children began to tell us that what Ruth and I were teaching them was not what they were being taught in the Baptist Church.

As I continued to listen, this time I found that the Lord was speaking through my children. Just as the Lord used Andrew to call his brother, Simon Peter, so the Lord used our children to call us to enter the Catholic faith. That too is another long story. But not long after we became Catholic, I remember saying, “It has been a long journey, but I finally found my way home.” But the Lord continued to call me. Again, I said as I

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had said years before, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” This time he was calling me to become a Catholic deacon.

Why do I tell you my story today? Because if God can call a Baptist boy from rural Mississippi to become a Catholic deacon, who knows what he may be calling some of you to do? Listen and wait for him to let you know, for sometimes—as with me—he has to tell us little by little what he wants. Who knows? Perhaps you may be like Andrew who brought his brother Peter to Jesus. And Andrew’s brother, Peter, became the first Pope. And so I appeal to you in the name of the Blessed Trinity and in the name of our Holy Mother, listen. Be patient, and when you hear God’s call, answer as Samuel did: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”