

“I Call You Friends” Part 5: Our Self, Our Friend
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The first week of November I was on study leave to be in St Paul, MN for my second-to-the last class with my cohort for my Doctoral thesis. For those of you who are not aware of my doctoral work, I am currently researching and studying this congregation and the way it goes about developing practices for discerning our ministry together with one another and with our extended community. Specifically, the thesis is monitoring the influence the practices we participate in with one another have on the decisions we make together as a community. Does our prayer practice with one another influence the decisions we make concerning what types of ministries we participate in as a congregation? Do the conversational or media practices we participate in influence our decisions? How about our community practices of engaging with other faith partners and community organizations, do they influence our decisions? Of course the answer to these questions is “Yes!” right, but my question is to what degree, and what is the actual agent of influence, ourselves or God? Maybe both?

I was still conversing with my colleagues about these issues surrounding our ministry here at Countryside during the time of the elections, and I wasn’t really paying much attention to the news reports because I had voted by mail in October so the election wasn’t even part of my day on November 8, I was still lost in my data, building tables and editing my latest chapter. When I woke up on Wednesday morning to an unusual amount of texts and emails regarding the election, I was incredibly overwhelmed. The candidate I voted for did not win. (I tell you this to give you a reference for my frame of mind, not to make any kind of political statement about your own choices.) I was totally shocked. It was clear in that moment, in a way that it had never been previously, that I had no idea what was really, truly, going on with my neighbors, friends and relatives throughout the country regarding some of the issues of the election, and I was completely at a loss. I had no idea what to do.

I kept asking myself, “How could I not have seen this?” “How could I not have prepared for the possibility of this?” I have been involved in politics most of my life. My Father was a politician and my undergraduate degree is in political science and constitutional law! This is not the first election in which I did not vote for the person who won, and yet it felt like I had no defenses in place to handle the news. How could this have happened? How was I not paying attention?

That’s where the shock was, really - I had somehow stopped paying attention. Ironically, while I was focusing on the importance for a faith community to intentionally “pay attention” through its conversation and practices with one another, I, myself, had stopped paying attention. As a consequence, I was at a complete loss for how to proceed. And for any of you who know me, even a little, not knowing how to proceed, is *VERY* scary! Had I somehow strayed from my call of listening and participating with my community? Had I lost that part of myself that has been called to “stand for the least of these?” as the Gospel puts it? As I struggled with these thoughts, I immediately stopped work on my thesis and began sitting in prayer, walking in prayer, looking for that part of me that seemed to always feel so sure about what I have been called to be about in this world.

Being called into participation with God and with one another is not a one-time event. It is an ongoing “practice” that is continually exercised and expanding. To stop paying attention to these practices

means to stop engaging in life. I had let my focus on my research, and all the stress surrounding that, take me away from the discipline of paying attention, of listening for God, of talking with my neighbors. Funny, right? a pastor, not listening for God. Well, now you know, it happens, and it's not really pretty when it does! But apparently I am not alone in my grief and lost-ness. People across the country are expressing similar experiences, and are trying to figure out how to reconnect with themselves, with God, and with their neighbors.

Losing connection to your sense of self is a scary place to be, no matter what triggers that disconnection. But our scripture today helps us remember, that even when we feel most lost or disconnected, it is not God who is separated from us, but rather us who are lost. Romans 8 tells us:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God has never lost track of us. Rather, it is us who has stopped paying attention to God.

Gary Ferguson, who was just here as a speaker for Center for Faith Studies, spoke on this sense of lost-ness and wandering. He used categories from Joseph Campbell's work with mythology in the history of the world to talk about it. Campbell found that many of the world's myths included a common pattern which he termed a "Hero's Journey." Ferguson reminded us that important stages in this Hero's Journey include a "loss of identity" and a "lost-ness and wandering." When something unexpected takes place in our lives, like the loss of a loved one, or a shake up in our worldviews, we often feel like we have lost our sense of self, or that story we tell ourselves about who we are, how the world works, and where our meaning is found. In this lost-ness we wander around for a time trying to re-gain this sense of self that has been lost.

Apparently it happens to everyone at one time or another in their lives. Biblically, we hear this story all the time, right? Moses and the Israelites wandered the wilderness for 40 years looking to re-gain their identity as God's chosen people. And Jesus wandered in the desert for 40-days looking for his sense of self. This lost-ness is not something to be feared, but rather something to claim and take advantage of, as it gives us the opportunity to consider many and various ways forward in our calls to participate with God in the world. Taking the time to get comfortable with our "discomfort" helps us step out of what we thought we knew and open our imaginations to other possibilities.

We just heard Deb and Terri and Connie speak to how important it is to be surrounded by friends when they are most lost to themselves. They told us that being with others actually helps them discover their own identity most fully! All the other groups we've heard from throughout this series have told us similar things. Being together with others, helps us define ourselves in a way that bring us most fully alive. Eric told us in his sermon last week that the best response we can have to each other after the election, or at anytime in our relationships with one another, is to gather together with some friends, join or start a journey group, and get out into nature, paying attention to the rest of creation. Practicing these things, we are better able to determine our best steps forward.

So this is exactly what I intend to do, and I encourage all of you to join me. As a community, this is what we do best: we pay attention to one another and to God in creation. We do this by praying, both in praying together, and in our own personal devotion times. We do this by creating opportunities to gather with one another, both in large groups, and in small group conversation. We do this by talking

to people outside of our community who might help us gain some information about what is happening in the neighborhoods that surround us. We do this by gathering with our Tri Faith partners and asking them how they pay attention to God in their traditions, as well as how we might participate together in our shared community.

In our history together, one of the best times of “intentionally paying attention” and listening for how God might be calling our community, came over two years ago now when we took 40-days to discern our call to interfaith ministry with the Tri Faith Initiative. I think its time we do something this intentional again. Representatives from the Board of Life Ministries have asked how they could help. With the whole country in the midst of transition yet again, we think this is a perfect time to take 40 days to sit with one another and with God to re-examine our mission statement together. In this we are able to discern if God is indeed still calling us to participate in our communities with these same priorities and values.

Our Advent sermon series begins next week. It is entitled “I Am” *Ego Eimi*. The Board of Life Ministries is proposing an intentional 40-day discernment period to study who we are as a community by looking at who Jesus says he is and how he engages the world in the Gospel of John. While we study these things together, we can also take the opportunity to gather with one another. We can bring in speakers from our community to tell us what is going on in the neighborhoods surrounding us, we can gather to pray together, we can gather in small groups to consider our current mission statement and how it speaks to who we are. We can set up workshops about learning to talk to one another, even when we don’t agree with one another. And we can gather with our Tri Faith Partners and see how they are doing in their own discerning for ministry.

When Eric was telling me about the evening with Gary Ferguson last week he said, “I believe tens of millions of heroes were born on election night!” I think he’s right. All of us have a Hero’s Journey in front of us, whether we were surprised by the election results or not. Each of us could use a little “lost-ness” in our lives in order to remind us to be listening to one another and re-claiming who it is that God is calling each of us to be about. Advent is the perfect time to “wander” since the whole purpose of Advent is to “Wait” and to “Pay Attention.” At the end of Advent, we celebrate the 12 days of Christmas, and are led into the light of “Epiphany” which means “manifestation,” God being present and leading the way forward.

Knowing that God is never separated from us in our journey, let us begin our Hero’s Journey by wandering together, and intentionally. We begin with reminding ourselves of who we say we are at the outset:

We are an inclusive, open and affirming family of faith, welcoming all to God’s table of love and acceptance. We are diverse, yet united by Christ’s example. We care for one another, support one another and challenge one another to become all that God creates us to be. We work together to nurture our community and to promote peace and justice in our conflicted world.

I wonder, will we be these same people at the end of our journeys? Only time will tell. Let’s give it the time that is needed.

Amen.