

THE GIFT OF LIMITATIONS
A sermon for Pride and More Light Sunday
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

1 Samuel 3:1-10

3:1 Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

3:2 At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room;

3:3 the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

3:4 Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!"

3:5 and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down.

3:6 The LORD called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again."

3:7 Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

3:8 The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy.

3:9 Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

3:10 Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

The Sundays when we read this passage in church growing up were some of my favorites. I loved the thought of this young person, a child even, being called by God by name, even when the adults couldn't hear it.

We almost always sang the hymn "Here I am, Lord" on these Sundays. I would sit in the balcony of our sanctuary, next to other kids in our youth group who were goofing off or doodling on their bulletins, and I would let the sound of the hymn wash over me. The words filled my lungs, then my chest, then my whole body, burning outward from my heart — absolutely earnest.

[sung:] "Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? ... I will go, if you lead me, I will hold your people in my heart."

My voice would break every time, tears hot in my eyes. I felt these words so strongly, felt so certain that they were for me. A calling.

I didn't know then that I would grow up to be a minister. I definitely didn't know then that I'd grow up to be a queer minister. I didn't even know there was such a thing.

I was still fully on board the veterinarian/writer/actress/teacher train. But I did feel, with the sort of unshakable certainty that perhaps only children can achieve, that God was calling me to something. I didn't know what. I couldn't imagine it. But I believed.

That call stayed with me, and eventually, in the fullness of time, molded itself into a call to seminary and ministry. Having grown up around an amazing woman pastor, I didn't question that I could be one too.

Until I came out. And everything changed.

I went to seminary in the fall of 2011, just a few months after the PCUSA officially voted to ordain LGBTQ pastors. Two weeks into the fall semester, I came out as bisexual. That was a hard year. Though I had grown up being loved and affirmed and embraced by the church community of my childhood — I was deeply afraid that they would reject me once they knew that I was queer and dating a woman, and that if they somehow did choose to keep me “under care” in my ordination process, it would cause an irreparable rift in the church I so loved.

I knew that many of them would be unable to see or imagine a future in which someone like me could be a minister. And I couldn't see or imagine a future in which I could live out my calling and maintain my relationship with them.

And so, with much heartache, I left them and continued my process at the openly affirming church I had been attending in Austin, where I was in school. That following summer, I attended a retreat for emerging LGBTQ pastors put on by an organization that was then called Presbyterian Welcome. Hidden at a retreat center in the mountains of north Georgia, the playground of my childhood, a few dozen of us gathered, queer and trans and all feeling called to ministry.

We shared in worship, in meals, in fellowship, in time to tell stories and care for one another and grow. It was a time of respite from a church world that felt so often threatening to us, and it was a time to dream of a different church, a better church, and a better world than the ones we knew.

On the last night of our retreat, we gathered for a closing worship service. There was a sermon — about Samuel's mother, Hannah, actually. And then, the worship leaders brought out several sets of plate and chalice, filled with bread and juice. And they told us to get into small groups and gave each group a communion set.

And then they said: the church declares that only those ordained as ministers can break the bread and pour the cup. And the church may not ever ordain us. But tonight, we stand before God and each other and we say, “Whatever the church thinks, we are called” and we claim our right to this sacrament. And so we presided at table for one another, we broke bread and shared cup and spoke the Words of Institution, and then we each placed a rainbow stole around one another's necks and affirmed each other's call.

It was an act of rebellion against the limits of the church. And it was an act of faith in the limitlessness of God. It was holy.

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This scripture for today is also a story about limitations.

In this passage Eli has grown old. His eyesight is going, the text tells us, and perhaps his hearing is not doing so well either. He is running up against his human limitations — which we all have in various ways — and those limitations keep him from hearing God's call to Samuel.

Samuel, meanwhile, is very young. The text tells us that he does not yet know God. He has not yet fully learned and so his knowledge and experience are limited.

And all around them in a world where visions have become rare. The people have run into the limits of their ability to imagine and believe.

And into this house of human limitation, God enters. And calls to Samuel.

"Samuel" God says in the night. "Samuel."

And Samuel says, "Here I am, here I am!"

But Samuel, in his youth and ignorance, doesn't recognize that it is God. So he runs to Eli, whom he trusts. And Eli couldn't hear the voice of God, so Eli tells him, "I didn't call you, go back to bed!"

Twice more this happens. God calls. Samuel misinterprets. Eli doesn't hear and sends Samuel back to bed.

Except the third time, though he cannot hear the voice, Eli perceives, given his own wisdom and experience, that God is calling Samuel. Eli knows that there is more to God's story than his own understanding. And so he tells Samuel as much, affirming the call. And he sends him back to bed and tells Samuel that when he hears the voice again, he should respond, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."

This is, in part, a story about limitations and how those limitations get in the way of our relationship with God and one another.

To be human is to be limited. We are finite. Mortal. We age. We must learn things in order to know them. Each of us, in various ways, has limits to our abilities. And what we are capable of imagining, of understanding, is shaped largely by the limits of our own experience, beliefs, and knowledge. We have a bias.

Certainly when our own experience or inexperience, our particular knowledge or ignorance shaped by the limits of our context, brush up against each other — we can find ourselves at odds with one another. Unable to understand each other. Unable to recognize how to move forward.

But there is a gift to knowing our limitations — and that gift is knowing that there is more beyond them. That we are limited but God is not. We see only in part. But at the limit of our individual knowing, understanding, ability — someone else's begins. And so together we are made more whole.

This is a story about limitations. But it's also story about faithful people who know to look beyond their own limits for truth. To trust in God and one another.

And so, Eli whose eyesight is diminishing and who cannot hear God, listens to what Samuel tells him. He sees and hears not only with his own eyes and ears, but with God's.

And Samuel — sweet Samuel — with his ready posture and willingness to respond, Samuel loves with God's heart. Together, they imagine with God's imagination. And discover God's call in a time and place that neither of them had thought of or expected.

See Eli and Samuel knew that they were limited, but they also trusted that God is not. Samuel — knowing his limited understanding and experience — seeks Eli's wisdom and truth. And Eli — with his limited hearing and sight — trusts in Samuel's journey and call.

From this moment, a great prophet grows. And what these verses don't tell you is that when Samuel returns to listen to God, he learns that God is displeased with Eli and his family and that there will be consequences for what they've done wrong. He is afraid to tell Eli, but the older man receives the news with humility and faith. He knows that leaning into God's expansive dream also means reckoning with where he has fallen short.

Sometimes our limitations can do harm to us and to others, but there is the gift as well. When we see them for what they are — we recognize that we need others — their vision, their hope, their gifts, their perspectives — to move past our own limits and dream with God's imagination.

One of the best lessons my queerness has taught me is that the full expansiveness of love is beyond the capacity of any one person to imagine or know. And that love, that limitless love is what, and how, and who God is.

God is limitless. God's dream for a better world is limitless. And God's capacity to call people, to make use of their gifts, to compel them to lead and inspire and challenge and grow — that too is limitless.

God calls non binary people and women and men. God calls people who are trans and those who are cisgender. God calls those who are asexual and bisexual and gay and lesbian and straight.

And the church is better for it.

Four decades ago a gay Presbyterian pastor named David Sindt rode an escalator up and down over and over at the denomination's General Assembly gathering, and he held up a sign that read, "Is anyone else out there gay?"

The church could not see the future that God allowed David to envision. But David's vision pushed the limits of what the church could see. It cost him, dearly. But all these years later, here we are in a future made better by God's call on David's life and David's willingness to dream with God's imagination and see with God's eyes and love with God's heart.

His actions at General Assembly ultimately led to the creation of More Light Presbyterians whose tireless efforts over the years — in conjunction with other organizations like The Covenant Network and Parity — led finally to the change in our polity that recognized God's call on LGBTQ ministers seven years ago.

And six years ago, I broke bread in a room full of beautiful God-beloved and God-called queer people — who even then were dreaming of and claiming our right to a future beyond our limits to see.

In the years since, one of those gathered became the Executive Director of More Light Presbyterians — the first transgender executive director of a PCUSA organization. Another became their communications director, whose voice is quoted in today's bulletin. Nearly all of us have since been ordained, or are well on the way to ordination. A lot of us were the first of our kind in our contexts — the first out openly gay man ordained in Texas, the first out openly

bisexual woman ordained in Texas, the first black queer woman ordain in the PCUSA, and the second. We were not the last.

One of those gathered in that Upper Room was my friend David Norse. I met him that weekend, when we were both seminarians, newly out, still grappling with the question of how our queerness could be reconciled with our call. With all the others, we presided at table together, illegally, in that room on that night.

And five months ago, we presided at table together again, this time at the church where he is called and installed as pastor, and where I had the privilege of guest preaching. Both of us out openly queer ordained ministers.

And not long after I was ordained — four years after I had left them in fear and with a broken heart, I returned to my childhood church to lead worship and was received with joy, love, and open arms. I preached a sermon called, “Homecoming.”

So much has changed and so much change and growth is yet to come.

All of that potential, all of that future goodness, and more — was swirling in that retreat center room. Hidden then, for fear of retribution, because we were beyond the limits of the church’s vision. It could not see us. And even we struggled to hope, but God is limitless. And God could see it all. And so we dared to dream with God’s imagination and see with God’s eyes and push the church and ourselves to grow.

Right now, this very second, new life and new vision is swirling. New possibilities are being born. And God is at work calling and leading and inspiring in ways and with people that we cannot hear or see or imagine. It is beyond our limitations and it is our work to trust and be open.

This is, no doubt, one reason God calls upon queer people to lead the church. Because our journeys through hate and hope, through doubt and discovery, through judgment and embrace — indeed our vary capacity for love that transcends boundaries — make us profound witnesses to this holy truth: that to love the world as God loves it, to see the kingdom that God calls us to, we must not rely on our own understanding, nor dream with our own imaginations, nor see with our own limited vision. Rather, we find the world of grace when we love with God’s heart, and dream with God’s imagination, and see with God’s eyes and then say, “Here we are. Speak, Lord, your servants are listening.”

May it be so. Amen.