

In researching the text for this sermon, I came across an article by Rodger Nishioka that touched me so much that this sermon relies heavily on his words. He tells the following story about growing up the son of a Presbyterian pastor:

“When I was growing up, there were several rules in our home. One rule was there was no television while eating dinner. This rule was broken every Sunday evening, however, because Dad wanted to watch Mutual of Omaha’s ‘Wild Kingdom.’ Each episode was a theological journey demonstrating to us all yet once again the wonders of God’s creativity and imagination in the natural world. One episode I remember fondly was about the elephant seals of Argentina. The show focused on a mother and her seal pup, who had just been born. Soon after birthing her baby, the mother, now famished, abandoned the pup on the shore so she could go feed in the rich waters off the coast.

“After feeding, she returned to a different part of the beach and began to call for her baby. Other mothers had done the same, and all had returned at a similar time; I remember thinking they would never find one another. The camera then followed the mother as she called to her pup and listened for the response. Following each other’s voices and scents, soon the mother and pup were reunited. The show’s host explained that, from the moment of birth, the sound and scent of the pup are imprinted in the mother’s memory, and the sound and scent of the mother are imprinted in the pup’s memory. This fascinated me especially when Dad turned to me and said, ‘You know, that’s how it is with God. We are imprinted with a memory of God, and God is imprinted with a memory of us, and even if it takes a lifetime, we will find each other.’”

Today’s text describes the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. Jesus is walking by the Sea of Galilee and calls the first four of his disciples. These four were all fishermen. Matthew says that immediately, immediately they left what they were doing and followed Jesus. It is as if they were compelled to follow Jesus and to obey him, almost as if they had been waiting all their lives to hear this voice, to be issued this call, so that when it came, they immediately dropped what they were doing.

Augustine opens the first book of his *Confessions* with the prayer “our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.” It would seem that these four men who were already in a worthy vocation had restless hearts -- so restless that when they heard Jesus’ call to them, they could do nothing else but leave everything behind and follow. Perhaps they were simply responding to what had already been imprinted on their souls from birth -- the knowledge of the voice of God -- so that when they heard the voice, all they could do was be reunited with the one who spoke it.

Rodger then continued with this thought: “If only discernment was so easy. Today’s world presents us with many voices calling us to do certain things and be certain ways.” We must determine whether each voice is calling us to be reunited with the Creator or leading us further from the One who loves us and in whom our hearts find rest. One way to discern the calling we hear is to examine the life of the one who calls us. In Jesus’ life the four disciples and we today hear the voice of God. Jesus consistently taught, preached, healed, and proclaimed the imprint of God, and who Jesus’ was and is leads us to be reunited, to find our true home in God. We can trust Jesus’ voice and leave behind what would hinder us on our journey to find God.

We've known people who say one thing but mean another. We are able to discern the difference between words and actions. Many years ago I remember hearing the words "I love you" to which I said, "People who love each other don't do what you do." There was a difference between words voiced and words reflected in the person's actions. We discern between who we follow by the consistent nature of words and actions.

Nishioka tells another story, a story about a young man who he met at a youth conference who was deeply distraught. The young man said that for some time he had been hearing God's call to him to end his life -- that the world would be better off if he were dead. "As he broke down sobbing, I held on to that young man and prayed with and for him. After several minutes, I whispered to him that while I believed he was hearing a voice that was telling him to end his life, it was not God's voice. The young man asked if I was sure. I told him I was certain.

"Then he asked me how I knew for sure and I told him that in Psalm 139 he is described as fearfully and wonderfully made and that Jesus himself said in John 10:10 that he came that he might have life abundant. 'God made you in God's own image,' I told this young man. 'God said you were wonderfully and fearfully made. God sent Jesus so that you might have life.' The voices the young man heard were not from God, because it did not fit God's nature. God is like that mother seal, calling us and seeking us, until finally, even if it takes a life time we are reunited with our hearts true home."

This past week I had occasion to listen to the faith journeys of two women soon to graduate from seminary. Both grew up in very conservative and regulated religious communities. Each had tried to be faithful to the teachings and traditions they had been taught.

Both had spent some years trying not to be gay because they had been taught it was a sin. One had spent months in the Exodus program which tried as she put it to "kick the gay out of me." But she was dismayed when it didn't seem to be working.

Both women got mad at God believing that somehow God had made them and then condemned them. Yet, God has a love that will not let us go. And through many twists and turns of their lives, these women had found the United Church of Christ where the voice they heard reflected the voice of God reminding them that they were wonderfully and fearfully made. They heard in word and in deed that "We are imprinted with a memory of God, and God is imprinted with a memory of us, and even if it takes a lifetime, we will find each other."

Those disciples might look to us to be foolhardy leaving perfectly good jobs to follow a traveling preacher named Jesus. But they knew right away that Jesus was calling them to the Holy One imprinted on their hearts and for whom they'd been searching all their lives. And so they left it all behind, and followed.

I love this image of the mother seal seeking her young pup until they are reunited, and the story of a young man who learned how to discern the differing voices who were calling him, and the young women for whom the love of God would simply not let them go until they were reunited with the one who made them as they are, and the disciples who recognized in Jesus the only voice that matters, the voice calling them to their hearts rest and lives work, the voice that would reunite them with the Holy One even if it took their entire lifetime. Blessed be the one who calls and the voice of the one who is true. May we follow.