

Today's sermon is designed to motivate you to do one specific thing – or at least to seriously consider it. People say they want a sermon to take the Holy Scripture and apply it to their life, with some kind of practical effect. Well, that is what is going to happen today.

In today's Old Testament lesson we find the boy Samuel having a direct encounter with the divine. At first – in fact, at first, at second, and at third try – Samuel was unaware of the spiritual nature of his experience. Samuel heard a voice calling him and the boy mistakenly thought the temple priest, Eli, was calling him. After the third time, the boy Samuel awoke the old priest, and we read, "Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy, therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go lie down and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

In the Epistle to the Corinthians the Apostle Paul gets specific about the relationship between bodily functions and spiritual health. Dietary restrictions, what foods were considered clean and unclean, lawful or unlawful to eat, were especially important to Christian readers brought up in Jewish Kosher households. Fornication - sexual license, pagan fertility rites, the use of temple prostitutes - was especially troubling to Gentile Christians brought up in a Graeco-Roman world where the Greek word used to describe public worship was "orgy."

The Apostle Paul, trained as a Jewish Pharisee but called to be the Christian Apostle to the Gentile world, gives instruction and guidance to members of the Church in Corinth about the relationship between things like sex and food to their spiritual well-being. Paul makes that connection between those physical things and spiritual things.

Finally, in today's Gospel, we find Jesus calling to Phillip to "Follow me." Phillip, in turn goes to Nathaniel and recommends a similar course of action, to follow Jesus or at least, to "Come and see." Jesus helps Nathaniel along by telling him things about himself – at first facetiously, but then with the insight of a spiritual master. So – what do these readings have in common? To one degree or another they are all Bible stories about people giving and receiving spiritual direction:

Samuel as a young boy, hears plainly the call of God but is confused about its meaning in his life. It is only after receiving the direction of an older, more experienced spiritual director that Samuel's spiritual experience receives its meaning.

The Apostle Paul, through his letters, guides the new Christians in Corinth. He makes clear the spiritual impact of their physical activities. Casual sex, or fornication, has a spiritual cost that the Corinthians seem to be unaware of. The spiritually enlightened Apostle directs his Church to deeper spiritual understanding.

In the Gospel of John, we see a disciple being made. Phillip, who, even though new in his spiritual awakening, invites a friend, Nathaniel, to join him in a spiritual journey by following Jesus, "about whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote."

In these three examples from the Bible, and there are many others, we learn that spiritual direction is a useful, highly valued and fruitful activity. People are often confused about what spiritual direction is and is not.

First of all, Spiritual direction is not Pastoral Counseling. The two are different. People come for pastoral counseling when they have a problem or situation in their life that needs examination and resolution. So, Pastoral Counseling, then, is situational. I have never had a problem, whether personal, marital, financial, parental, or vocational, that did not have a spiritual dimension; but seeking advice in a religious context is not the same as spiritual direction.

Pastoral Counseling has more to do with problem solving; Spiritual Direction, however, is often undertaken when everything is going great!

A person may want to deepen an already good relationship with their Lord. Perhaps a metaphor might be helpful: Imagine that you want to go on a jungle safari into the bush to visit some ancient ruins. You know where the trail starts, as so with great enthusiasm you start off – but you soon get lost and wind up back where you started. Still, wanting to visit the ruins, you read some books about safari travel and this time, you buy a map. Once again you start out,

you see wonderful sights and have a wonderful experience – but before reaching the ruins, you run into fallen trees across your path, and swollen rivers block your way. You made good progress, but – back you must go to your starting point. Finally, you hire a guide – someone who knows the jungle well and has been to the ancient ruins a few times himself. The jungle guide is experienced, and will go with you into the bush. Now, if you come across an obstacle, a fallen tree, a raging river, you have someone along with you who has seen it all before. Your guide will know several routes and will help you find the one that suits your journey best.

A Spiritual Director is like the jungle guide. A person of deep spirituality herself, the Spiritual Director has knowledge of the trail and the destination. Importantly, your spiritual director will be on the spiritual journey with you. Some experiences will be predictable, but there will be surprises for both of you along the way. One of the factors that makes spiritual direction so exciting and so necessary, is the unpredictability.

Jesus told Nicodemus that “the Spirit blows where it will.” You never can predict exactly where Spiritual Direction will go because at its root, Spirit Direction is about relationship.

One Spiritual Director told me that his Spiritual Direction always begins with the same question: “How are you and Jesus doing?”

Like any relationship there will be ups and downs – times of intense interaction, and times of thoughtless neglect. There will be times when you are not quite sure why but between you and Jesus, “the thrill is gone!” There will be times in your spiritual journey when you feel like Samuel: you hear a call but you are not sure what action to take. There will be times when you find yourself in the same place as the Christians of Corinth: not sure what to do with old habits and familiar ways of thinking. There will be times when like Phillip: you will want to share your new spirituality with others but not sure how to do that without embarrassing them and yourself. For all these times, as Scripture shows, a Spiritual Director is more than beneficial.

Finally, a Spiritual Director is not a magician who will wave a magic wand and make you a spiritual

master. Like someone going to the gym to get stronger, you can bet that somewhere along the line your physical trainer is going to recommend exercise. When a person comes to me, overburdened by the busyness of their life - the burden of their obligations - but still feels the emptiness of their ceaseless activities, it should come as no surprise that I will recommend a spiritual retreat, or time in each day to do nothing but pray and read scripture. Or, it should come as no surprise that a person preoccupied with their possessions, yet feeling spiritually bankrupt, will be told by a Spiritual Director to try giving something away.

Spiritual Direction is not about magic, but it is about Grace.

It is about actively seeking that for which we were created. I will end this with the words of a true spiritual master, Henri Nouwen, a quote from ***Reaching Out*** :

How do we know that we are not deluding ourselves, that we are not selecting those words that best fit our passions, that we are not just listening to the voice of our own imagination? Who can determine if our feelings and insights are leading us in the right direction?

Our God is greater than our own heart and mind and too easily we are tempted to make our heart's desires and our mind's speculations into the will of God. Therefore, we need a guide, a director, a counselor who helps us to distinguish between the voice of God and all other voices coming from our own confusion or from dark powers far beyond our control.

We need someone who encourages us when we are tempted to give it all up, to forget it all, to just walk away in despair. We need someone who discourages us when we move too rashly in unclear directions or hurry proudly toward a nebulous goal. We need someone who can suggest to us when to read and when to be silent, which words to reflect upon. And what to do when silence creates much fear and little peace.”

Amen.

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