

It is so good to be here with you today. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Richard Lee and I have the distinct pleasure and honor to serve as Priest-in-Charge at St. Mark's in City Heights. St. James and St. Mark's have a long history of shared ministry, especially in the area of outreach. And so it is particularly nice that I can be with you today as you mark your outreach Sunday. Thank you for the invitation and thank you for having me.

This morning, I also bring greetings and deep heartfelt thanks from the people of St. Mark's. Greetings and thanks for all of your support. Of course, and especially, we are thankful for your financial support, for your practical support, and the ways in which you volunteer. Without all of that, we wouldn't be able to do half the things that we do do. And so, from the bottom of our hearts, thank you. But I also want to thank you for your prayer support as well, because I know that many of you do keep us in your prayers and we feel those prayers and prayers get translated for urges into actions, actions to be, as our motto says, "God's hands in our community in City Heights." Please continue to keep us in prayers as well.

Let's take a look at our readings. You recall the last week, our readings explored the baptism of our Lord. But here we are, a week later, and our lectionary readings help us move forward, beyond baptism, to the life that follows it. Our readings today are also so relevant to outreach. There is so much that I want to say, the widening of the circle of witness that we see in John's gospel, but we're limited in time so I'm going to stick just with Samuel. Let's see what that ancient text is trying to tell us today?

The story of Samuel is one of my favorite Bible stories, as I am sure it is for many of you as well. It's got a little bit of everything in it. Samuel, as you will recall, was conceived by his then barren mother, Hannah, and so, was always destined to be a child of promise. At about the age of three, he began his service in the temple. I doubt, even as he got older, that he really knew truly what was going on. He must have wondered what these strange rituals that Eli, that old priest with failing eyesight, who he served, was all about.

Remember that we read in the text how the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days. Visions were not widespread. The word of the Lord was rare in those days. Visions were not widespread. To me, that sounds like maybe the temple had passed its peak. Maybe membership was down a bit, or maybe those who came lacked a little bit of enthusiasm, a little bit of sparkle. The temple had probably got stuck in its ways. Maybe tradition had morphed into doctrine. The place was as lively as the old priest himself. Maybe the leaders and members of the temple were looking inward or maybe they weren't looking at all.

And if you don't look, then you're likely to miss a vision. I think when many of us read this story, we focus on Samuel. Totally understandable. We can easily see a pattern of ministry and outreach, a pattern of call, response and then, in the text that follows what we read today, nurture. Samuel hears a call, a voice calling him. He doesn't realize that it's God and thinks it's the old priest. Maybe you wondered, "Why would God speak to such a young boy? Why is he persistent?" Three times Samuel gets it wrong. But then on the fourth call, he responds to God, "Speak, your servant is listening."

As you read further in Samuel, you get the sense of nurturing of a boy, so that he could become the prophet that he was destined to be. In our lives and in our ministry and in our outreach, we use this model, we try to look outwards and listen to what God is calling us to do. We respond by our actions in the many different ways in which we serve and we nurture, sharing God's love of all God's children. As we listen to that call, it is a call for all of us. And as we see God's calling to Samuel, a young boy with no status on the margins of society, we, as Christians today, recognize that God has a call for everyone, including, and I would say often especially, those who are at the margins, those who are persecuted and those who are rejected by the society in which they live.

But I want to suggest that if we only focus on Samuel in this story, then we'll be missing another message that I think could help us today. As I said before, the picture of the old priest, the temple, the community around him, had lost its sparkle. It was stuck in its

ways. But I think that old priest was very wise. He didn't try and profit from God's call to Samuel. He recognizes he, himself, didn't recognize that it was God calling at first. But when he did, his actions were to guide and help Samuel. And 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.'"

Maybe it's the wisdom of Eli. Maybe the wisdom was that the Lord was calling new life, new ways to witness, new ways to serve, new ways to live out our faith. Sure, today's story about the young Samuel is a model for us. Call, response, nurture. But maybe it's also a reminder that we constantly need to find new ways to hear the call of God, new ways in which we respond. When we shout out, "Here, I am Lord. Use me." That can look so very different today than it did even 20, 30, 40 years ago, let alone a millennia ago or more.

I'm always looking for new ways in which we can nurture all of God's people. All of this is evolving. Of course, we build on what is good from our past. We respect and we honor our traditions. But we always try to remain open, outward looking. New ways, new ministries, new ways of sharing God's love.

At St. Mark's, life in lockdown COVID pandemic, has forced us to listen to what God is calling us to do. We've just spent just over a year working on our strategic vision, and we hope that the strategic plan that has come out of that will help us to become a healthier church. One of the strategic pillars is to concentrate on doing a small number of things well, rather than trying to take on a large number of things and just doing them mediocre. In terms of outreach, that means that we won't be launching lots of new services. But we will be aiming to connect deeper with the community and the people of which we serve.

Our response has most definitely been modified as a result of the pandemic. We've concentrated all of our outreach on the food pantry and we're not able to do some of our big events last year. But the food pantry work is vital. Since the pandemic began, we've seen the number of people coming to get food from the pantry, people who are food insecure, almost triple,

and we expect that level of service to continue beyond the vaccine. We expect it to continue for two or three years to come. The need for the food pantry is as strong now as it ever has been and will continue to be.

And how do we nurture? What has the pandemic done with that? If you're a member of our mailing list, you'll have read a series of stories that Mother Hannah wrote about people who we serve. I'll share some of those stories with Walter in the office and, hopefully, you can get a chance to read them, as they go into a little bit of detail about the lives of those who call St. Mark's their community. We nurture by forming connections, building community.

You may know that I'm bi-vocational and work for a secular company during the week. But a couple of weeks ago, I was able to spend some time at the food pantry and sat talking with one of our guests. Just before Christmas, he received one of the backpacks filled with practical items to help improve the holiday season and, truly, he was grateful and thankful. We sat there and we talked, one person to another. He started to tell me his story, how the community around St. Mark's had become his family and how important, not only the food, but the sense of being known by his name, by being shown care and concern, and being valued as a person, as a child of God, how important all these things were to him. It meant the world to him.

But thank you for your support. This enables us to go deeper and build relationships with our community. Please do keep St. Mark's in your prayers. Maybe the pandemic is our Eli, giving us the wisdom to constantly evolve, to look for new ways, better ways to serve our community. This year, we need that wisdom and we need your prayers. From the bottom of our hearts, thank you.