

**June 3, 2018 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope**

**1 Samuel 3:1-10, Psalm 139**

**2 Corinthians 4:5-12, Mark 2:23—3:6**

Working Preacher Sermon Brainwave for this date. Senator Cory Booker at Festival of Homiletics, May 22, 2018.

**Grace and peace to you, in the name of our creator, our redeemer, and our sustainer. Amen.**

**I spent the week before Memorial Day Weekend** in Washington DC at the Festival of Homiletics.

Homiletics is a fancy word for preaching, so let's be clear: it's essentially a week of sermons.

And some of you are groaning, no way,

but truly these are sermons from some of the best preachers in our time.

It was a fantastic week as 1,700 of us immersed ourselves in sermon after sermon,

all under the theme preaching and politics.

One of my favorite "sermons" came not from a preacher but actually a politician.

There are plenty of jokes you could insert right about here—let's just leave it at that.

**Senator Cory Booker from New Jersey joined us one afternoon.**

I listened from the side balcony of Metropolitan AME Church—a church with history the likes of Frederick Douglass.

I listened leaning in as Senator Booker told us about Miss Virginia Jones.

Years ago, during law school the now-senator wanted to immerse himself in a neighborhood, really engage.

So he moved into a rougher area of Newark and looked around at his new neighborhood:

the drug dealing, the rough patches, the folks on the corner.

He'd been told to find this woman named Miss Virginia Jones on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of a public housing complex.

So with the swagger of a Yale Law student, he sought her out, knocking on her door, offering his help.

**As he tells it, she eyed** him with a skeptical, cynical look, a look that told him she knew that he was more truly the one in need of help.

Then Miss Virginia Jones took Cory Booker back down those flights of stairs and outside,

"Before you help me, you need to tell me what you see in this neighborhood."

He looked around at all those rough patches and analyzed them at arm's length:

the housing crisis, the violence, the drugs, the poverty, the school to prison pipeline, the hopelessness.

That's when Miss Virginia Jones turned and walked away, saying: "You can't help me."

But he stuck with her, pleading, respectfully pleading.

Finally she relented: Boy, you need to understand the world you see outside is the one you see inside.

See love, and possibilities, and the face of God, then you can be one of those people who helps me.

See decency and mercy, then you can be one who helps.

**In the Children's Message, we talked about the call of young Samuel.**

Samuel, Samuel, God calls, not once, not twice, but four times in our reading from the Hebrew Bible. The first three times Samuel hears his name, he thinks that Eli has called, and rushes to Eli's bedside. That final time, with Eli's coaching, Samuel stays put, listening for God's voice, saying, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening."

**We so often focus on Samuel, but thank goodness for Eli.**

Thank goodness for his wisdom, his perception that it was actually God calling Samuel.  
Thank goodness for his experience—he's the elder priest who has faithfully kept his promises even as his own sons, some of them priests themselves, are apparently stirring up trouble. Life is messy, isn't it?  
Thank goodness that as his eye-sight has grown dim, his spiritual hearing has grown clear, sharp.  
Thank goodness that Eli is humble enough to hear what comes in the verses that follow.  
For God isn't pleased with Eli's house, and Eli is able to hear these truths that Samuel must share.  
Thank goodness for mentors and coaches,  
for advisors and teachers,  
counselors and guides and friends who help us hear God's call more clearly.

**Who are those people** who come alongside you and help you hear **that** the Word of the Lord is *for you*?  
Who are *your* Elis?

**For Senator Cory Booker, Miss Virginia Jones did just that.**

For me, it is Mary Graves.  
She was the one who said to me when I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade—a bit of a Samuel, I suppose—you should really think about being a pastor.  
She was my friend's mom, and our families camped together, later cabin-ed together—every Memorial Day Weekend—forever.  
Back then she was a busy parent of four, and a nurse, all about justice especially in Central America.  
She sang in the church choir and taught my Sunday School class for a season.  
And she causally, pointedly, named my calling as I washed tables and chatted after a church dinner.  
Mary acted for me, as Eli did for Samuel.  
Mary reminds me of many of you.

**Who are those people who come alongside you and help you hear that God's calling is for you?**

This week a chemistry grad student told me about her high school chemistry teacher, and then her college advisor: a whole parade of people who are Eli for her.

People who have helped her listen to God's call to use her smarts and her passion to become a chemist, a faithful, deeply-rooted chemist.

This week it was a similar conversation with a musician, an amazingly skilled musician, living out his calling, his vocation in our public schools.

**Who comes alongside you? Who helps you hear God's voice?**

It might be easy to assume that "Elis" are always older and "Samuels" are always younger.

Don't get stuck in that paradigm; it's limiting, and it's just not true.

It's our four year old who is quick to invite our family into silent prayer and

she's also the one who remembers to mark that soft cross on *my* forehead as I tuck her into bed.

This four year old at my side helps me hear God,

not so different with my nine year old,

similar with some of those in our youth group,

and the twenty and thirty-some-things in this community, too.

They, you, all could be called Eli, walking alongside, helping us hear God's word.

**I've been asking: Who comes alongside you? Who helps you hear God's voice?**

But then flip that question, for whom are you an Eli? \_\_\_\_

What is your role of listening for God and helping others hear God's call? \_\_\_\_

There's an openness, a trust, a grace, in this role, naming what you witness and sense and hear.

**I know, I know: "How can this be?" we sometimes wonder.**

How can I be like Eli for those around me?

To the people of Corinth, Paul writes, we have these treasures in clay jars, in earthen vessels.

That's right: Paul doesn't say we have these treasures in rare pots made of gold,

but rather in common everyday clay jars...fragile and resilient bodies, yours and mine.

That's who God uses to love this world and to open possibilities—earthen vessels, you and me.

When our bodies are strong...and when they are not,

when mental health is a struggle,

when we are weary and worn down....

we are reminded again that this treasure, this wisdom,

this power of Jesus Christ,  
is held in clay jars, simple bodies,  
as humble as the one to your side, and  
as extraordinary as the God who searches us and knows us, who knit us together in the first place.  
God is at work in you, and through you.  
Quite often it's the mortal at your side who can help you hear God's calling most clearly.

**That neighborhood that Senator Booker** moved into 20-some years ago as a Yale Law student  
is his neighborhood still today.

Back then without knowing, he held it at arm's length,  
but now it's his community and in it he sees love and potential and the very face of God.  
In a more recent shooting that killed a young person he grieved personally, up close.  
Miss Virginia Jones also felt the pain of this loss.  
Her tears for this young person mingled with her tears for all the others who died too soon.

They mingled with her tears for her own son who had died years earlier.  
Finding one another in the hours after that shooting, both raw, both in tears,  
standing outside that public housing complex  
Miss Virginia Jones wrapped Cory Booker in a giant hug, rubbing his back,  
in all that grief, in all that memory,  
in all that love and hope and loss,  
repeating a mantra of sorts as they embraced: Stay faithful. Stay faithful. Stay faithful.

**Dear people of God, this week, this summer,**  
in the joy and in the grief,  
in whatever it is you do that heeds the call of Christ,  
in however it is that you walk alongside others: Stay faithful, dear ones, Stay faithful.  
For life is at work in you. Always.  
Amen.