

TWO FORCES IN THE CHURCH: HUMAN NEED AND GOD'S CALL

I. Introduction

(Prepare Bible passages ahead of time. Show outline and questions.)

The Christian faith as we know it is the result of two forces: **human need** and **God's call to us** to be agents of love, peace, and justice. Our particular needs may drive us to the church for **support from a community** of people who care about us, for **healing from God**, for **answers to the great questions of humankind**. The God we come to know through Scripture, through our history, through the liturgy, through the community itself, God blesses us in our efforts to get our needs met. "Come unto me," Jesus says, "all you who travail and who are heavy laden and I will give you rest." **I will give you healing. I will make you whole.**

But God doesn't just stop with meeting our needs as we come to him, our Father, as we come to her, our Mother. God also calls us to be workers in the Divine Vineyard, **agents of peace and justice, agents of healing. God calls us to help bring in what Jesus called the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God.** That's the second force within the church. So there are two forces: Human need, getting our particular needs met; and God's call, God's call to us to be the **Divine Voice in the world, God's call to us to be Christ's hands in the world.** That call may or may not meet our needs at least in the short run.

These two forces are ultimately not separate forces, but it is helpful to speak of them separately to analyze how they impact the church. Let's first look at the human need force.

II. Human Need

Here are some of the needs that I see people bringing to the church today.

First, there is a great need to gain understanding about this fragile and at times dangerous world in which we live, to gain understanding and with God's help to gain some power to be **at home** in this world, described in one of the Episcopal communion services as "this fragile earth, our island home."

If we didn't know just how fearful and unpredictable the world is before September 11th and then Katrina, we surely know it now. Destructive things happen without warning. Suicide terrorists crash into and destroy buildings we thought invulnerable. Levees break; storm surges demolish.

Life is not just. **Many innocent people suffer.** Imagine how many children throughout the world, even in our own cities, suffer immeasurable harm because society neglects them while others get terribly rich, and the powerful become more powerful than ever. All of us at various times suffer personal tragedies that make no sense to us.

So many turn to the Christian faith to make sense out of the unpredictability of human life and to find ways to control what comes to us as evil.

In the Old Testament or Hebrew Scripture, the Israelites came to believe that if they obeyed God's will, God's law, God's instruction, the Torah, they would be blessed with a good and safe life, in the long term if not in the short term. God would reward the righteous and punish the wicked. So the way to have our needs for safety and stability met was to do what God told us to do, particularly in the Ten Commandments but in all of the law as recorded in the Pentateuch or first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

It didn't take the Wisdom of Solomon in ancient Israel (or what we might call "rocket science") to see that this didn't always work. **Often the wicked did prosper and the righteous did seem to be punished.** Some of the great prophets of Israel dealt with this question, which came to be called the *theodicy*. How do you make sense out of the suffering and evil in the world? And how do suffering and evil relate to each other? Those are the two primary questions that theodicy attempts to answer.

It was the author of the Book of Job who dealt most profoundly with the question of why bad things happen to good people. The Book of Job doesn't really say why the innocent suffer, but it does begin to show us how to move forward in a world of innocent suffering. For now, I am just trying to make the point that people turn to the Christian faith today to answer the difficult

questions of human existence, the kind of questions many of the prophets and Job tried to answer.

Second, many want to find in the church a caring community, a place where they will be appreciated. In my experience, the church and other faith communities are generally the best place other than family to find a strong sense of community, a **place you can call home**. The DOCC program has worked so well in large part because it does offer community, especially in the small groups. As we say in DOCC, our hope is that each small group becomes a mini-church or the church in minuscule. There may be more of a need in our present society for community than ever before. A Harvard sociologist, Robert Putnam, wrote a book *Bowling Alone*, on this subject. He discovered that while just as many people bowl these days as before, there are not nearly so many bowling clubs. He finds that highly significant, showing the breakdown of community in our society. Putnam and we in DOCC believe that the need for community is just as great as ever, greater.

Third, people turn to the church to find healing from the various problems and anguish life hurls our way, whether from physical illness, marital problems, dysfunctional family problems, or death of loved ones. Clergy and trained non-clergy often offer counseling of various kinds.

Many churches offer healing services. In the past, I have loved being part of healing services. It was the one service in the week when I could both lead the service and receive from it. I used to say at these services, “There may not be a cure but there can always be healing.” In 1999, our lovely twenty-nine year old daughter, Abigail, died. We were at Trinity Boston at the time. The people who regularly attended the healing service that I help start there wrapped us in love and support, both before Abby’s death and for many months following her death. They knew when to give us active support and they knew when to give us much-needed quiet. The words I had said for many years suddenly took on new meaning for Corinne and me: **There may not be a cure but there can always be healing**. The church community was there for us. . . .

Fourth, people turn to the church to lift up important moments in the life cycle: birth, puberty, marriage, death, especially.

- Many want to be married in the church so that they can have their relationship blessed, made holy, and then, when they have children, they want them baptized, blessed in a powerful way. Later, those same children when they become teenagers often have a wonderful experience in teen programs, such as the Episcopal Journey to Adulthood (J to A)—where they, as they go through the stormy teen years, experience God’s unconditional love.
- When it comes time to give up this life and move on to a greater place, many who have not been to church in years want to be buried from the church or at least want one of the clergy to preside at a graveside service, or their families want that.
- Many people attend church only on Christmas and Easter. Christmas gives special meaning to **God’s blessing of human life as we celebrate God becoming one of us**. Easter gives special meaning to **life that triumphs over death, the death we live as well as the death we die**. Of course we want these people to become regular members of the church, but if they come only on Christmas and Easter, we in the church need to be there for them then.

Fifth, still others come to church to appreciate the great beauty of the liturgy, the music, often the solemn beauty of the architecture. They come to have a place in the midst of all of the loveliness to gather their thoughts and commune with God.

All of these things are obviously good things. The trouble is: many people don't get beyond this aspect of the Christian faith. **Too many people are consumers only; they come to church only for what the church can give them**. Often they are generous in their contributions to the church in thanksgiving for what the church has given them and their families and they are willing to do a certain amount of volunteer work along the way.

What have I left out? What would you add? (A way to give thanksgiving for sure.)

But there is more to our faith than what you might call Consumer Religion. It is too easy for us to worship our personal well being and success. It is too easy for us to think of the faith as a place where we do not give very much **but primarily receive**.

III. God's Call

The prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi is a wonderful example of a response to God's call that we be the Divine Voice in the world, Christ's hands in the world.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is dying that we are born to eternal life.

In the long run our responding to God's call will meet all human need, but this may not seem true in the short run, at least for me and I think for most of us.

Some Biblical background now on God's call to us. Many centuries before God called Moses, God called a man named Abraham. He and his family lived in the Ur of the Chaldee in present day Iraq. We know nothing of Abraham's life before God called him, except that he was married to Sarai and that he was called Abram. Later after God makes a covenant with Abram, God changes his name to Abraham and changes Sarai's name to Sarah.

One day, seeing that the time is right, God calls Abraham and asks him to leave his country, his people, his immediate family, and to go to a new land that would be shown to him. God told Abraham that he would be the father of a new people, a special people who would change the course of world history. Abraham had done nothing to deserve this great honor; the mystery of the call lies entirely within God and the divine plan. But Abraham did respond to the call and he responded immediately. God said to go, and at once, we are told, Abraham went. **Read aloud Genesis 12:1-9.**

Even though this is one of the earliest passages in the Old Testament, there is a strong message of universalism in it, an amazing message for the time—over three thousand years ago—that God loves those people outside of the chosen nation as well as those inside. The Lord says to Abraham: “I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you . . . and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

The Lord is saying that Abraham and his descendants will be a model of what God wants for all nations. Israel will be a light to the Gentiles. Learning from Israel, the other nations of the world will be blessed. This is God's long-range hope. In the call of Abraham, as in the call of all great figures in Scripture, there is a moral emphasis. Abraham is called not just to initiate a new nation, but a nation by which all of the world would be blessed.

The next great call that we read about in Scripture is the call of Moses in the Book of Exodus. This was most important to Dr. King, as we will see. The nation that Abraham founded went into voluntary exile in Egypt, but soon the people were enslaved and oppressed. God called Moses, who was definitely not up for the job, to deliver the people from the oppression. **We read now from Exodus (3:1-12).** Moses protested mightily but God would not release Moses from the call. **He promised only that he would be with Moses; he would be by the side of Moses no matter what.**

Later in Israel's history, God called many others to speak with the Divine Voice and to do God's work in the world. I think especially of Amos, Isaiah of Jerusalem, Isaiah of the Exile, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Now let me turn to the New Testament so that we can listen to the call of the first four disciples and then the call of Saul of Tarsus (Paul).

We read now from **Mark 1 (16-20).** This is at the beginning of his ministry. By "fish for people," Jesus is telling Peter and Andrew and James and John that they will serve people the way he serves them. While they cannot understand all that Jesus has in mind, the four disciples leave their nets and their families as they answer the call and they follow. We find, as the Gospel narrative unfolds, that the first disciples had no more business answering the call than we do. Especially in Mark's Gospel, they make mistakes over and over again. And when it comes time for Jesus to die, they deny him and they run away.

The point for us is: Jesus took them as they were—as he takes us as we are--and gradually made of them his church.

While women are not mentioned at this point, we know that Jesus called many women to be among his closest disciples, women with names like Ether, Salome, Mary, Ruth. They, by the way, did not flee but were there when they crucified our Lord.

And then finally, let me jump to the decade following the death of Jesus and listen to the call of Saul of Tarsus, whom we know as Saint Paul. But he was no saint before the call. In fact, he was persecuting Christians, having been an accessory in the murder of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. Here is what happened: **Read Acts 26: 12-18**. Notice that the call is for Paul to carry on the work of the church, to take the good news to Gentile lands.

I emphasize the call of these individuals in Scripture to illustrate that the *you-are-called force in the church is different, at least at the outset, from the force that meets our individual needs*. To respond to God's call is not easy. In most of the situations we read about in the Bible, those who are called feel terribly inadequate and do not easily accept the call. **They struggle mightily with God before they accept the call.**

God and then Jesus will not easily let those people go, but stays after them as "the hound of heaven." Jesus did not promise that their personal needs would be met, but told those who would follow him to take up their cross in order to follow him. Those he called would become a particular kind of community. The word for church in Greek (the language of the New Testament) is *ecclesia*, which means "called out."

IV. Answering God's Call

It is of course not an easy thing for us to answer God's call, for two reasons. First, we may have difficulty knowing just what God is calling us to do. Scripture itself and discerning God's call with other people of the faith can be most helpful. One way to discern God's special call is to think of the particular hunger in your world, **however you define your world**, and then consider what special gifts you have. How can you use your gifts to meet the hunger of the world? DOCC should be helpful.

Second, when we do have a sense of God's call to us, we may, like all those people in the Bible, struggle mightily to answer that call. I have known since 1966 that I have a special call to work for racial reconciliation and justice. I grew up in a loving but very segregated community, a racist community we would say today, in Old Charleston, South Carolina. In various ways which I can't go into now, God let me know that I was called both to love Old Charleston, the village that raised me, their child, and at the same time to fight the racism. I can tell you that over the years I have struggled mightily to answer my special call. As too many people will tell you, I am always making mistakes. But I hope I am learning.

Let me now give two examples of people who answered the call, the call to serve, the call to discipleship. The first person will be known as long as our nation exists; the second is known only to a few, but she is very much known to God.

Late one night in 1957 after he had become a highly visible civil rights leader during the Montgomery Boycott, **Martin Luther King** lost his nerve. He had just received a particularly menacing telephone threat. "I felt myself faltering," he wrote of this experience. . . . "I was ready to give up." Maybe for the first time, King grasped the seriousness of the situation. His family could be taken from him at any moment, or more likely he from them. He thought of baby Yoki sleeping in her crib, of her "little gentle smile" and of Coretta, who had sacrificed her promising music career to follow her husband south.

Sitting at the kitchen table, with his head now buried in his hands, King bowed his head and prayed:

Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I still think I'm right. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. Now I am afraid. And I can't let people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.

As he prayed, he heard a voice saying, “Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you. Even until the end of the world.”

“I heard the voice of Jesus,” King wrote. “He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No, never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.”

A few years before, the young Martin King had become an ordained Baptist minister. Much to his surprise, at his new church in Montgomery, Alabama, he received a call to lead the Montgomery Boycott, a one-time effort he believed. But that late night in early 1957, for the first time he knew that God was calling him to devote the rest of his life to freeing not only his people but all Americans from the great sin of racism.

That night he identified closely with Moses when he was called to lead his people. In the burning bush, as we read earlier, the Lord appeared to Moses and said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. . . . I have seen how their taskmasters oppress them. Now I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

God was calling Moses to the huge task of freeing his people from slavery in Egypt. God was calling Martin Luther King to the huge task of freeing his people—all of us—from racism in America.

Both resisted the call. Moses said, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” A short time later, Moses goes on to say, “I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.”

Martin Luther King was never slow of speech or tongue. But, he resisted the divine call just as strenuously. “I am weak now. I’m faltering. I’m losing my courage. Now I am afraid,” he said.

God then spoke to young Martin King much in the same way he spoke to Moses. **God said to Moses, powerfully but simply, “I will be with you.” Jesus said to King, “I will never leave you. I will never leave you alone. Never leave you alone.”**

Once called by God, Moses accepted his particular lifelong mission and did indeed lead his people out of bondage and right up to the Jordan River, where atop Mount Nebo, he could see the Promised Land.

From that day, that night in 1957, Martin Luther King accepted his call and led **his people, all of us**, right up to mountaintop, where we too could see the Promised Land. . . . He talked about that just before he was shot in Memphis.

Let me tell the story now of a quite different call, in its own way just as powerful. It's the story of **Old Miss Grimshaw**. A while back in my ministry at Trinity Church in New Orleans, the phone rang about eight o'clock one evening. One of the parishioners in the church I was serving at the time, Miss Esther Kent (a very proper lady high up in her eighties) was calling to see if I could come to her nursing home, St. Anna's, right away, to bring communion to an even more elderly lady, Old Miss Grimshaw, as eighty-five-year-old -Miss Kent called her.

Old Miss Grimshaw was ninety-five and was dying. She had no close family. Of course I dropped what I was doing and headed for St. Anna's right away, my communion set in hand. . . .

Miss Grimshaw was propped up in bed, her thin white hair still beautifully done up. She was smiling but was so weak she could neither talk nor raise her hand to meet mine as I reached for her hand. "Tell me about your friend here," I said to Miss Kent as we both looked into the gentle eyes of Miss Grimshaw.

"Ahh, Mr. Barnwell," she said, "There is a wonderful story to tell. For over fifty years Miss Grimshaw served her fellow man as a nurse. She worked in small towns and in large cities. During World War II, she worked on a hospital ship that went clear round the world."

Miss Ester Kent then took Miss Grimshaw's hands in hers and said, as she stroked them, words I'll never forget. "You see these hands here. These hands have soothed many a sick person. They have healed many wounds. They have stroked many a worried brow. Mr. Barnwell, these are the hands of Christ." Old Miss Grimshaw could only smile, but oh, how lovingly. We then had our prayers and our communion. Later that night, she died, Miss Esther Kent still by her side. . . .

Do me a favor now and hold up your hands in front of you. Take a good look at those hands. Maybe they are young and strong and without blemish or maybe they are getting wrinkled like mine with old age spots showing up. But whatever those hands look like, please know that those hands, like the hands of Old Miss Grimshaw, your hands are the hands of Christ.

Think of all of the healing in the world you can do with those same hands: as you raise your children and the children of your church with loving care, as you reach out to those in need in your community and beyond, as you carry on your everyday work in your business, your industry, **your home**, your school, your hospital or wherever you work, **touching other lives with those hands, serving others, following Jesus.** . . .

One of the main reasons for the existence of the church is to help the members discern just how God is calling us and what God is calling us to do and to be. I hope that the DOCC program will help you discern your special call to discipleship. In your small groups tonight, you can make a start if you haven't already.

V. God's Call Does Meet Human Need

Now having talked about the two forces in the church as separate forces, let me now try to put them back together. When we answer the call that really is the call, we find that **we are on the same side with God** and when that happens we come to learn that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, to use St. Paul's words. We are indwelt by Christ; he is in us and we in him. **And that state of being will meet our greatest need.**

Please read over the questions for discussion and move to your small group in silence reflecting on one of the first two questions you might speak to and then one of the last two questions you might speak to.

VI. Questions for Discussion

Note to the facilitators. Discuss the first two questions first, letting everyone speak who chooses to before there is cross discussion. Then shift to the last two questions, following the same process. (In past DOCC programs, participants have started with questions #3 and 4 and never gotten back to #1 and 2.)

1. Think of your past relationship with the church, this church or other churches. Has the church been there to meet your needs in some way and/or the needs of your family? How?

2. How would you like the church to help meet whatever needs you or your family may have?

3. Has the church helped you to discern your call to be God's voice, Christ's hands in the world? How?

4. How is or how might God be calling you to serve at this time in your life?

(A lot of people new in DOCC have difficulty answering this question. This may help: Think of particular needs in your family, your church, your community and beyond and think of your particular gifts to meet those needs. Imagine that there is a personal God and the God is calling you to meet those needs. Talk about that!)