

First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
January 15, 2012  
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: The Life God Gave Us,

Scriptures: I Samuel 3: 1-20, I Corinthians 6: 12-20, John 1: 43-51

One of the political hot topics sure to be raised again in this election year will be government entitlements. Who is entitled to what in the federal budget? The entitlement debate is interesting in our country where so often people brag about being self-made, independent, and do not want government interference, yet still want something from the government. I mean we pay our taxes don't we, so we deserve something for it. Sometime entitlements may be very necessary and are used wisely. Others may not be deserved and not used for the common good. The foundational problem may be the attitude we human beings develop once we are given something. We think we are entitled to even more at any cost and people get hurt. Even our relationship to God can become badly twisted when we have an unhealthy entitlement attitude.

This was a big problem for the Chief Priest, Eli and his sons who had oversight of young Samuel as we heard about in the Old Testament Lesson. Eli's sons assisted him in the Tent of Meeting where the Hebrews worshipped. They had been given a very good life by God, along with great spiritual responsibilities. Unfortunately, as we will see, Eli and his sons took what God gave them and turned it all into entitlements in the most negative sense.

These men of God forgot what we can forget; that all the life we have is a gift from God. Our lives and this world are not something we deserve, but they are given to us by God out of sheer grace. Our call to worship from Psalm 139, tells us that we are fearfully and wonderfully made by God. Psalm 24:1 reminds us "The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." There are no entitlements in God's world, or in the life we have been given. It is all a gift given to us only because God loves us, and wants to share "the immeasurable riches of his grace" with us. God's gift of life also comes with responsibilities for God expects us to be good stewards of this life, of this world and to nurture his creation to his glory. These men of God in Samuel, and we humans today, too often forget that all of the life we have is a gift from God.

You see, in the Old Testament, all priests were called to stand before the presence of God on behalf of the people in the Holy of Holies in the Tent of Meeting in Jerusalem. In its most ancient Hebrew etymology, the word "co hen" or "priest" meant bridge. In the Koine or Biblical Greek it is "Ir e ose", which means "to Stand." Putting it all together, a Biblical priest is a person who stands before God as a bridge for others so that they might have access to God. Eli and his two sons were to be the bridges to God for the Hebrew people. They had agreed that the life God gave them belonged to God and they would serve him only.

However, I Samuel 2 tells us, the sons of Eli were scoundrels; "they cared nothing for Yahweh nor for what was due to the priests from the people." Whenever anyone offered a

sacrifice, the sons, as God's servant priests, would **not** accept the meat that had been given as a cooked or burnt sacrifice to God as the law of God required. You see, the sons of Eli wanted the raw meat so that they could cook it and eat it themselves. This eliminated any connection the worshipper might have to God in offering a sacrifice. These corrupt priests would say to the worshippers, "if you do not give us the raw meat now, we shall take it by force—Bullies!" The young men's sins were very great in Yahweh's eyes, because they treated with contempt the offering made to Yahweh and the life God had given them. They were also having illicit sexual relationships with women who served as greeters at the Tent of Meeting. Eli and his sons failed miserably as bridges. These priests were behaving in a beastly entitlement manner by forcing, controlling and manipulating people. The ministry and life of a priest of God was to be loving, healing, calling out evil when necessary, and to be bringing freedom in one's relationship to God and others. Eli and his sons allowed power, sex and food to dominate the life God had given them. These priests failed miserably as bridges and had a terrible effect on others. Their relationship to God had become fatally distorted. TNIBC, Vol II, pg. 988

In contrast to this, we have the priesthood as seen in the young teenager named Samuel. In the midst of the scandal of Eli's sons, slept this young man. His mother had dedicated his life to God before he was born. Near the dawn of one morning, God called him to be a priest in the style of a prophet priest who spoke God's truth and lived in God's ways. It took four times for Samuel to understand that it was God calling him. This makes sense to me. How many times has God had to speak to me or you in some way or another for us to finally hear the call?

We may or may not realize it, but our first call from God may have been the one we received when we were baptized, just as like the call little Evelyn Good received as the water and the Spirit came upon her today. It is a call where God claims our lives, the lives he gave us by his grace, and seals us to him.

In our baptism God calls to us to be part of the "Priesthood of All Believers" and a "bridge" on God's behalf to others in the society around us. The idea of our being a priesthood of believers comes from I Peter 2: "But you are a chosen race, a kingdom of **priests**, a holy nation, a people to be a personal possession to sing the praises of God who called you out of darkness into God's wonderful light." In the Presbyterian and Reformed version of the Christian faith, we have a slogan based on I Peter 2, where we acknowledge that we are "The Priesthood of All Believers." This means that every person who confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior recognizes that the life we have comes from God; by the grace of God; belongs to God; and in our baptism God calls us to be a priest or bridge to him for others wherever we live, work or play.

God's call for us to be his priests or bridges is not always easy to fulfill for it has a great influence on the life God has given to us. It takes great trust in God and courage of commitment. Eli, who had raised Samuel as a son, made Samuel tell him what God had spoken to him. The message was that Eli and his sons were going to be kicked out of the Tent of Meeting for their terrible behavior. In great fear, but desiring to be obedient to the God who called him, Samuel did what

had to be done and told the truth. Samuel could have been killed for speaking the truth. Whistle blowers often pay a terrible price, but in the end God was with Samuel and the ways of God prevailed. Initially, it sounds inspirational to say that we have been called by God to do something and have given our lives to serving the God who has given us our lives. Yet, God can call us to take on some tough challenges in ministry.

This Monday is the celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day. What a call God gave to him as a young adult to challenge the evil of racism and racist structures in our society. God walked with him through many a mile of protest marches and more than several nights in jail. Martin Luther King Jr. became God's civil rights bridge to connect all of God's children, black, brown, yellow and white to God and one another. Unfortunately, some evil men did not value the life God gave to Dr. King, and it cost him his life.

We do not have to be on the front lines as Dr. King was, but we may be called by God to be bridges for others to God. As God's bridges or priests, we may face challenges in our jobs, in our schools, our volunteer work, our families or with ourselves. What you and I say or do to someone else will have an effect on them, for good or for bad. The bullying problem in our community is an example of a bad effect. Bullies believe they are entitled to push others around. This problem needs to be called out and solved. It is a challenge indeed to be a bridge to God for other people, and even more so when we call out the evil going on. Yet, like it was for Samuel, because it is God who gave us our lives and calls us, we need to know that God also walks with us as we do his priestly work.

Regardless of the task God calls us to in the "priesthood of all believers," all it really takes is to say, "Yes" to the Lord with the same basic faith and trust that the young teenager, Samuel had in God. He said, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." It is that simple and that courageous. You see, Samuel turned out to be a very strong bridge, who gave the people access to God, and who carried God's messages back to them.

The passage from I Corinthians is also about how we use the life God has given us and the effect, we, as Christ's priests, can have on others. This passage was written to new Christians, some of whom had been worshippers in male and female prostitute religions which involved not only sex, but heavy drinking and gluttony. Some had been faithful Jews who had felt imprisoned by the laws and rules of the synagogue. They heard about and responded in faith to God in Jesus Christ, through the witness of the Apostle Paul. They had become, as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians, people "who have been consecrated in Jesus Christ and called to be God's holy people with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord as well as ours." They had given the lives God gave them to be a part of the priesthood of all believers, bridges to one another for God.

The problem was that after they had been freed by Christ from pagan religions and the oppression of synagogue law, they developed the negative entitlement attitude where they thought they had the freedom "to be and do anything" they wanted with the lives God had given them. But, as Paul wrote, "not everything is good for us." Paul further chastised these new Christians in stating... "do you not realize that anyone who

attaches themselves to a prostitute is one body with them, since the two, as it is said, become one flesh. But anyone who attaches themselves to the Lord is one spirit with him. Do you not realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you and whom you received from God?" And, what about the dignity and wellbeing of the young women, men and children who were enslaved into prostitution; where was freedom and salvation for them as long as ancient pimps and johns used them for sex? Do we not realize that God in Jesus Christ gives us our lives, our sexuality, and we need to live by God's ways, not just for ourselves, but for others, too? So when the Corinthians abused the freedoms we have in Christ, and allowed sex, food and debauchery to control their lives, which is true of so much of our modern society; they became like some of the bridges in our highway systems, potholed with rusted through supports. They easily collapsed into the river when they were struck by all kinds of beliefs and practices that could spoil their witness as priests and weaken their superstructure as God's bridges. We must be careful of this negative entitlement attitude, too, as Christian Americans, so that we do not turn our God given lives over to debauchery and lose our effective witness as bridges for others to God.

In the reading from John 1, we also discover what kind of disciples or priests God in Jesus Christ wants us to be; and how he wants us to live our lives. He wants us to be like Phillip and Nathaniel. They were willing to surrender their lives to him. They realized that Jesus was the ultimate priest or bridge for all people whose hearts and bodies cry out so desperately to be one with God. With them, let us again surrender our God given bodies, minds and spirits to God alone. Let us use them to his glory. I think this use of our God given lives should be the hot topic in this election year. For, we never know when or in what circumstances the call will come from God's Holy Spirit for us to be a bridge for others who need to see God's will in us, or who wish to be introduced to Jesus. As we answer God's call may our prayer be, "Oh God, give us the same basic faith and trust in you that the teenager Samuel had, so that our response to your call, may simply be, 'Speak Lord, for your servant, your priest, is listening.'" Amen.