

Homily - January 14, 2024 – 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time



I'm going to make a generalization which I think is true. It is that everyone, who has ever come into our lives—even for the shortest amount of time—has made a contribution to who we have

become. Even someone who was a bad example, indirectly, set us on a path to become the opposite of what they are. So, there is learning in the negative. There is much to be learned in the world of pain, suffering, and at the foot of the Cross, and we dare not miss it. Some people, who are more spiritual advanced than I am, have even gotten to the stage of being grateful to God for the negative. They chalk up every moment, good or bad, as being grist for the learning mill and never waste a moment being bitter. Having said that, I just hope, especially with young people, that their lives will also be formed by good examples, good mentors, so that they can learn in the positive and get off to a good start in life.

While I believe everyone makes a contribution, I also believe that only some people make a lasting contribution, and those are called mentors. I'm sure Taylor Swift, whose net worth is \$740 million, Kawhi Leonard who earns \$51 million annually to dribble a basketball, and Shohei Otani who makes \$70 million/year to play baseball, are all nice people. They are just not models, mentors who can help us grow in the spiritual life. They are not the mentors we find in today's scripture readings.

A few years ago, the great poet from Minnesota, Robert Bly, died. During his lifetime, he was a prolific writer and public speaker. His most popular book, Iron John, remained on the New York Times Best Seller list for 62 weeks running. He spoke and wrote a lot about the importance of mentorship and how it might be the greatest thing lacking in society today. One of the things he said is that “a good mentor cares about your soul.”

Jesus, of course, is our ultimate mentor. And when he says, “Follow me” we can trust that he cares about our deepest desires, our innermost longings...our souls.

A mentor has to be someone you trust but doesn't have to be perfect. Our first reading is an example of that. A barren woman named Hannah goes to the Temple and prays, rather extravagantly, in the hope that God would answer her prayer and grant her a child. Her prayer was so extravagant that the priest, Eli, accused her of being drunk and told her to go home and sober up. She responded with, “I am sober. I just have a strange way of praying.” (There has to be better ways of getting pregnant than showing up at church drunk!). In her prayer, she promised that if God would grant her a boy, she would dedicate that boy to God. Sure enough, she has a baby boy and names him Samuel. When Samuel is old enough, his mother, Hannah, sends the boy off to live with the priest, Eli, just as she had promised God. This is where we picked up the story today. Eli becomes the boy's mentor. While both Eli and Samuel are asleep in the Temple, the boy was awakened three times by a voice calling him, so he immediately went to Eli thinking the priest wanted him. Eli explained that he had not called Samuel but

discerned that it was God calling him. Eli, being a good mentor, taught Samuel how to listen to God's voice and how to respond to it.

Eli was far from perfect. He may have been a high priest, but he was a terrible role model for his two sons who led wild lives and made a mockery of their Jewish faith. Eli wasn't mentor enough to discern between a drunk woman and a prayerful woman, wasn't mentor enough to discipline his two wild sons, but he was mentor enough to know when God was speaking, and mentor enough to teach Samuel how to listen to God's voice. In the end, he was trustworthy and really did care for the boy's soul.

We get this similar care and mentoring from Paul in that second reading. He writes to the Christians in Corinth. Corinth was the Las Vegas of Biblical times; it was sin city. Even the Christians were not much better, but Paul never gives up on them. They mistakenly believed that because Jesus was risen, the power of sin was broken, therefore, they could do whatever they wanted sexually and otherwise. Paul, being a good mentor, reminded them that since Jesus came in a body, and since he honors you with a body, you ought to honor Him with your body. Your body is created with the same dignity as Jesus' body. If Jesus' body was the Temple of the Holy Spirit, so is yours. God owns all of you, your physical and spiritual parts. Your body, for Paul, is the entirety of who you are. So, let people see God in and through your body, in and through all you are. That's the language of a good mentor. A good mentor cares about your soul. A good mentor wants you to be the best version of who you were always meant to be.

In the gospel, John the Baptist and Jesus are good mentors. John the Baptist can take people only so far because he knows he's not the "real deal." Jesus is. He is not upset nor insulted when he points to Jesus with the words, "**Here is the Lamb of God**" and two of his own disciples immediately leave him to follow Jesus. That's a good mentor; that's someone who cares for peoples' souls.

Andrew and an unnamed disciple immediately follow Jesus. Although Jesus was never officially declared a rabbi, these two call him "Rabbi" nonetheless. By calling him Rabbi, these two must have sensed that they had something to learn from him. I think the hook that got them was Jesus' simple words, "**What are you looking for?**" Jesus knew their souls were looking for something and desiring something that neither John the Baptist nor the world around them could give them. Nobody had ever asked them how they were doing on the level of their souls. (On a personal note, I've been asked thousands of times, "How's it going?" Only one person in 58 years asked me, "How's your heart?" and they weren't talking physiologically).

With their hearts stirred, these two, now former disciples of John the Baptist, asked, "**Rabbi, where are you staying?**" They weren't looking for Jesus' civic address. "Where are you staying?" translates into, "Where do you draw your life, your energy from?" Isn't that true of us, when we admire some virtue in someone, we immediately want to know where they got it from and if we can get some of it for ourselves. "Where are you staying?" can also be translated into, "Where will we go, if we follow you? How will our lives end up if we follow you? Will we find

the life that's animating you? Will our hearts, our souls, find what they were always looking for?"

The call of Jesus for them then, and the call of Jesus for us now, is initiated by Jesus when he says, "What are you looking for?" These are the first words out of Jesus' mouth in John's gospel. Jesus poses that question at the beginning of the Gospel but only answers it at the end. What is the answer? What are we ultimately looking for? At the end of the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene, on the morning of the resurrection, goes looking for Jesus, carrying spices to anoint his dead body. Jesus meets her, a little dusty and smelly, but not in any need of embalming. She doesn't recognize him initially but thinks he's a gardener. Asking the "gardener" where she might find Jesus, the Risen Lord says to her what he said in the opening lines of the gospel: "What are you looking for?" Then he answers it: With deep affection, he pronounces her name, "Mary!" In doing that, he tells her what she and everyone else is looking for—God's voice, one-to-one, speaking unconditional love, gently calling her name.

Who are the mentors in your life? Who have helped you hear and respond to voice of God? Who cares about your soul? Who speaks your name with unconditional love?

~Fr. Phil