

Sermon: Pentecost 18B 2021

Have you ever done anything challenging that surprised you, that seemed out of character in terms of what you usually do? I was thinking about that as I prepared for today and was reminded that in the early 1990s, I was asked by the Girl Scouts to take the required training to be certified to lead kids on a low ropes challenge course. I was their camp director, and they had installed a low ropes challenge course that spring ready for the summer. So, I took 2 days off from my teaching job and went to Rutgers for the training. I was only in my mid-40s, but I was easily the oldest there ... What the training involved was the whole group of about 10 of us doing every activity as a group and then discussing/evaluating what we had done so that we could have that same conversation with the kids whom we would instruct. It was challenging; several of the obstacles were hard for those with a bit more weight. The hardest of all was the 12 ft wall. We each had to get to the top. Our group discussed the best order and several of the fittest men climbed on each other in order for one to get to the top. As I am a light weight, we agreed I was to be near the last to climb. But oh my, climbing on top of a young guy, on his thighs, then on his back and then reaching for the hands stretched down to pull me up was scary. Yes, I did it; we all did. You probably don't share that experience, but I invite you to think of things you did that surprised you.

In our readings today that theme is there. For Moses all that happened in the incident we heard must have surprised him. To begin with he must have been horrified that the people were so difficult. He had led them from the brutal slavery they had undergone and no longer were they working in terrible conditions making bricks and building for the Egyptians. Yes, they had eaten food they really liked in Egypt, and it seemed that all they remember was the food. Moses is in despair with the attitude of the people. Next God was angry, and Moses must have been fearful knowing the power of God having seen it in the plagues in Egypt. Moses felt God was blaming just him and felt it unfair. He then lashed out at God; he really did. Hey God, these are not my people, I did not give birth to them. I cannot find the food they crave for. As Moses felt God was blaming him for their attitude, he told God that if God expected him to do everything for this crowd of people, he would rather be struck dead. That's a big statement. When he got up that morning do you think he expected he would be yelling at God like that? But he did. As you heard, God listened (I add, as you might expect, that I believe God always listens.) God offered a plan; get 70 leaders of the groups of people on board. They were to be commissioned to help Moses. God offered a great plan – one we have been using ever since of course – our vestry may not have 70 members, but the vestry provides the leadership for our church. Furthermore, Moses recognized that the ministry of leaders could be undertaken in different ways. The two men who did not attend and get commissioned in the regular way could still be in ministry. There are many of you here who are not on vestry but can still lead in different ways. So, Moses continued, stayed alive, and had the relief of shared ministry. He used God's solution and it was a new experience for Moses.

Continuing with the theme of doing things which surprise you, I ask you about your prayer life. Do you spend many minutes a day in prayer? When do you pray? Do you have a regular schedule, do you use your Book of Common Prayer (we have copies you can borrow if you are without one)? In the letter James wrote he emphasized the power of prayer and the need for you (as someone hearing his letter read) to pray. James told you the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Could you include a prayer time in your daily schedule? When you do I hope you will find, as those who do it find, that prayer changes you; it gives you compassion and empathy.

Jesus like Moses commends those who are in ministry which is "outside the box" in their thinking. Jesus as you heard, went on to warn about the sin of deterring, dissuading anyone from believing in him. I do not think he was speaking literally about chopping off your hand or your foot or pulling out an eye – there are no accounts of dozens of people thus handicapped in the area at that

time. But I think Jesus was warning that you can do things, go to places, and see things which detract you from your journey of faith.

Today Sean and Kristie are here with baby Samantha and little Bryson. They will be making promises for her. You will also be asked to support them. You can do this by your prayers for baby Samantha and for the whole family. She will grow and no doubt do things which surprise herself as well as her parents. They with your encouragement will help her choose her way forward, a way which will take her closer to God, on her own journey of faith.

I also share with you the story of a woman named Anna Ellison Butler Alexander who was the youngest of 11 children, born to recently emancipated slaves Aleck and Daphne Alexander on Butler Plantation in MacIntosh County, Georgia, in 1865. Her parents were devout Episcopalians, and also instilled in their children a love of learning. Anna became a teacher, and eventually the only African American to be consecrated as a deaconess in the Episcopal Church. I am sure she had not known this was to be her life journey as she grew up, but Anna dedicated herself to working for the education of African American children in poor communities. First, she helped to found and to run St. Cyprian's School at St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church in Darien, and in 1902 she founded a school at Good Shepherd Church in rural Glynn County's Pennick community, where she taught children to read—by tradition, from the Book of Common Prayer and the Bible—in a one-room schoolhouse. The school was later expanded to two rooms with a loft where Anna lived.

In 1907, she was consecrated as a deaconess by Bishop C.K. Nelson. Deaconess Alexander served in difficult times, however. The Diocese of Georgia segregated its congregations in 1907 and African American congregations were not invited to another diocesan convention until 1947. However, her witness—wearing the distinctive dress of a deaconess, traveling by foot from Brunswick through Darien to Pennick, showing care and love for all whom she met—represents the best in Christian witness.

The poor white residents of Glynn County also trusted Deaconess Alexander. When the Depression hit the rural poor, she became the agent for government and private aid, and Good Shepherd Mission served as the distribution center. Locals remember that no one ever questioned her as she served the needs of both races in a segregated south. Strictly religious, strictly business, Deaconess Alexander commanded respect. White men took off their hats when she passed.

Deaconess Alexander wrote, "I am to see everyone gets what they need...some folks don't need help now and I know who they are. The old people and the children, they need the most...when I tell some they can't get help just now...that others come first, they get mad, a little, but I don't pay no mind and soon they forget to be mad."

She ministered in Pennick for 53 years, leaving a legacy of love and devotion that is still felt in Glynn County. She died in 1947.

You are not Anna, of course and your journey of faith has been different and will continue to be different. You might be thinking and asking God where God is wanting you to go, and in what way God wants you to "think outside the box." It could be a journey you are not anticipating. One of our members Dave Sullivan is the vestry member for Social Justice. He is also the coordinator, leader of the RAMP program to help refugees, the Refugees Assistance in Morris County Program. Dave was informed there are hundreds of families at present in a local detention center. These families will in time be able to leave and then need a place to live, jobs for those able to work, schools for the children, health care and tutoring. Helping just one family

will be a big undertaking but with the help of many people it can be done. Maybe God is encouraging you to play a small part in this upcoming ministry. Your part can be a onetime offer, such as bringing household items to them, or taking one of them shopping for groceries. It could be ongoing support, such as offering to take one of them shopping on a weekly basis or taking family members to a doctor as needed or being a tutor if you have the skills to do that. No one can do everything; everyone can do something and together we can show our love and care. God told Moses to gather 70 to support the amount of ministry needed to serve the Israelite people. Ministry is to be shared and you are invited to be a part of it today.

So today I invite you to ask God how you can serve in ways you are not expecting. Pray to God and stay in prayer listening for God to speak to you. You may be surprised. Did the 12 disciples know in what way their lives would go forward when they accepted the call to follow Jesus? Do you know? But one thing is sure, God knows you, God loves you and God will be with you on your own journey of faith, everyday of your life. Amen.