

A Sermon for the Second Sunday After Epiphany 2015 2B
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Today both our first lesson and our Gospel lesson are stories about being called – Samuel is called by God to prophesy to Eli, and Nathanael is called, first by Phillip and then by Jesus into discipleship. And calling may well be on many of our minds these days. This church is in the middle of a search for a new Rector, and the Search Committee is about to sort through what I am told is already a large number of excellent candidates' cover letters, resumés and profiles to begin to determine whom the parish should call to serve. And, as those who were at any of the forums that Bishop Sutton held this week know, a great deal of the passion and anger in the church about the death of Tom Palermo after being struck by Bishop Suffragan Heather Cook, who has been charged with driving drunk and texting and leaving the scene of the accident, has been about the process by which Bishop Cook was called.

Some of you, no doubt, can add to the context in which you hear these readings your own struggles with what God is calling you to do or be right now.

The last time I talked to all of you about the tragedy of Mr. Palermo and Bishop Cook, it was in a message in our weekly e-mail to the parish a few weeks ago. At that time, very little had been made public about what had actually happened, and there was little to do but pray and wait. Now we know a great deal more.

The story is a terrible one. Tom Palermo was a kind and gentle man, a loving husband and father of two young children, who was a builder of custom bicycles and who was riding his bike in a well-marked bike lane when he was struck by Bishop Cook, who fled the scene. Tom later died at the hospital from his injuries. But the church has become very focused on one detail that has been revealed – that Bishop Cook had a previous DUI arrest, which involved not just a very high level of alcohol in her blood, but also marijuana and drug paraphernalia found in her car. So although people throughout the church are praying for the Palermo family, and raising money for a fund for his children (here at St. James' we will take up a special offering on their behalf on February first), most of the passion and outrage in the church seems to be about who knew what when, and whether the diocesan Search Committee was sufficiently diligent and sufficiently forthcoming, and to a lesser extent whether the church as a whole is dealing with alcoholism and addiction in a healthy way.

No doubt the church will benefit from rethinking the search process, especially with regard to appropriate secrecy and necessary transparency. Although there are occasionally legitimate reasons for secrecy – not making public who is in a Rector search, for instance, to preserve the good relationships of candidates who are not called with the parishes where they will remain – nonetheless institutional secrecy

always creates opportunities for abusers to act, and needs to be subjected to close scrutiny to see whether the benefits actually outweigh the risk of abuse.

And no doubt the church and the world beyond will benefit if we have a richer, healthier, more productive conversation about alcoholism and substance abuse and our responses to it. One thing that has been made apparent by the events of the last few weeks, for instance, is that we as a church and society are much more likely to think of men who are alcoholics as victims of a terrible disease, while women alcoholics are more likely to be perceived and spoken of as having a serious moral failure.

No doubt this story has been heard differently by those in this church whose lives have been touched by substance abuse than by those who have never loved or been someone in its grip. One of the reasons that is true is that few who have not been so touched truly understand what addiction means. And although the Episcopal Church was part of the creation of Twelve-Step programs, and continues to support them at a very high level, recovery is still held quite separate from the community life of most of our congregations.

But before we do any of that self-examination, and indeed in order for us to do any of that rethinking and reimagining, we need to focus on what we are called to be and do in the present moment. It's a question I have been thinking about for a while now, and indeed one of the reasons I haven't said anything about Tom

Palermo and Heather Cook from the pulpit until now is that I wasn't at all sure what to say. But my thinking has been helped a great deal by an essay that I recently read by The Rev. Laura Everett, and I will put links to the full text on our website, but want to share some of it with you now.

Everett writes:

A man has died. And we have spent the preponderance of our social media conversation talking not about Tom Palermo, but talking about protocols for episcopal elections, proper disclosure of information, and “what this means for the Church.” We say “it is an utter tragedy for all involved,” and then spend 97% of the conversation about the tragedy this is for the Church. Perhaps all this focus on Bishop Cook and the Church is a symptom of the family disease of alcoholism in our family system of the Church. It is good and right and far overdue that we have serious conversation about addiction and recovery in the Church, alcohol in the Church, and how we talk to one another in the Church. But if these are the only conversation we are having, we look and probably are, self-involved.

Each blog post I have read reacting to Bishop Cook's accident and the arrest that followed has included at least one sentence calling for prayer for the Palermo family. Many blog posts have pointed to a fund for the Palermo children. These actions are right and good, but not enough. If these brief sentences are simply footnotes to “the real conversation,” the Church again looks self-involved, like the biggest tragedy here is a besmirching of an ecclesial reputation. This should be an introspective time, but not exclusively so... If we spent even half as much time talking about Tom Palermo and his family and the cycling community, we would have a wider sense not only of “what this means for the Church” but what this means for the world beyond the Church, the world about which God is as much concerned as ours.

Get as curious about Tom Palermo's life as we've been about Bishop Cook's. Hear the anger of the cycling community and do not correct

it. Simply hear the grief the cycling community at the death of a kind man who learned how to build bike frames and commuted to work daily by bike. Feel the daily anxiety of bike commuters. Palermo was killed on a stretch of wide road with bike lanes, a road considered very safe in North Baltimore; Use your pastoral imagination to wonder how unsafe other cyclists are feeling after his death. Hear the anger of cyclists who learned of Palermo being left to die at the scene of the crime. Imagine what perception of the institutional Church the cycling community has after this tragedy. Hear the disappointment of cyclists that, in the words of Bicycling magazine, “a supposedly moral pillar of the community” flees the scene of a dying man. Listen to the cyclists wondering if class, ecclesial, and white privilege factored into the time delay between the accident and the arrest.

Learn about the ritual tradition among cyclists of memorial “Ghost Bikes,” roadside shrines of white bikes placed at the site of a cyclist’s death. Visit a Ghost Bike memorial, stand with fear and trembling with your car keys and cell phone in your hand and vow before that memorial to the dead you will never drive distracted. Include prayers for the safety of vulnerable road users in your prayers of the people and prayer of confession for distracted drivers. Ask the cyclists in your parish how safe they feel on the road. Send a note of condolences to your local cycling advocacy group or bike shop. Advocate for safer road policies for cyclists.¹

Everett concludes her essay by asking us to give as much weight as we have given to our thoughts and conversations on Bishop Cook to what this all means for the Palermo family, the grieving cycling community, and our own responsibility as a motorist.

And I have quoted her essay at such length because it needs to be said, and I could not say it better myself. We must not co-opt this story by making ourselves the

¹ The Rev. Laura Everett: *The Bicyclist and the Bishop From the Door Zone*
<http://reverevert.com/2015/01/17/the-bicyclist-and-the-bishop-from-the-door-zone/>

victims or the perpetrators. It is Tom Palermo and his family's tragedy. It is Heather Cook's sin. But it can be, if we will listen, our call. A call to prayer. A call to action. A call to change.

Amen.