

Since this is Father's Day, I'd be remiss if I didn't start by saying how blessed I am to be a dad.

Fatherhood is truly one of the greatest joys of my life, especially with two wonderful kids like Rebecca & Ethan. We were recently on a family vacation at Disney World, and it was just a wonderful reminder of that. So Happy Father's Day to all of the dads out there.

Those of you who heard – and saw – Joel's sermon last week may recall that he shared some maybe not-so-flattering pictures from his youth. Well that inspired me, and so this week I thought I would...nah, just kidding! Maybe I'm not as courageous as Joel, maybe I'm not as foolish, I don't know. Anyway, not gonna happen, at least not in this sermon.

It was about 5 ½ years ago that I started hearing the voice. It wasn't so much a voice as it was this repeating thought in my head. The time of year was approaching that TPC's Nominating Committee gets to work to determine the next class of leaders for the church. The voice – or recurring thought – in my head was telling me that I should nominate myself for Session, TPC's 9-person governance body that works with the pastors, Rob & Joel, to set the church's strategic direction.

Much like Samuel, I didn't recognize this as a calling from the Lord at first. Samuel thought the voice was Eli calling to him. I thought it was my own egotism or desire for power or prestige. For a couple of months, I wrestled with that voice – was it really God calling to me, or was it a thought of my own creation? Should I simply let the Nominating Committee do its work and see if they nominate me?

Eventually, I took a leap of faith as it were and put myself in for self-nomination. The rest, as they say, is history: the Nominating Committee accepted my self-nomination, and including a re-nomination three years later, I've now been on Session for the past 5 years.

During these past 5 years, I've become more and more convinced that God was indeed calling me to serve on Session. And what a 5 years it's been!! From 2 major visioning exercises that have fundamentally shifted the focus and priorities of TPC and reshaped our staff, to a global pandemic that

compelled us to embrace virtual forms of worship and ministry. I am so proud to have been a part of this hard work – led so wonderfully by Rob & Joel. It was certainly not without its challenges, including some contentious moments between me & Rob (hopefully if he watches this, he'll be smiling or chuckling right about now) and between other Session members as well. The results may not be perfect – everything is always a work in progress – but I think what we have accomplished in the past 5 years is truly a reflection of the Holy Spirit at work here at TPC.

As I head into my final year on Session, I would like to take a moment to reflect on what I think are some of the areas in which our church has made the most progress over the past several years, and one that I think is an area of concern as we move forward.

The first area in which I think we've made great improvement is finances. One could easily make a case that TPC is currently in the best financial condition it's been in for decades, certainly the 15+ years that I've been here. I have been consistently and repeatedly amazed at the generosity of this congregation, particularly during the pandemic. Not knowing what the future had in store at a time when things looked pretty dire, in April 2020 Session began to plan for what we thought may be some very challenging times ahead from a financial perspective. It turned out that when push came to shove, though, congregational giving actually went UP that year. And then giving grew again in 2021, exceeding leadership's expectations once more. We've also been blessed with some wonderful bequests from members' estates and, up until the past few months, a very friendly investment environment. There was a time when I was concerned about TPC's finances when the next recession inevitably comes. I am far less concerned now, even with the prospect of that next recession perhaps being on our doorstep as we speak. But it is incumbent on all of us to recognize God's call and heed it to continue to generously support TPC's work and mission.

The second area of great progress that I'd like to call out is Adult Spiritual Formation. It's hard to believe that our Adult Spiritual Formation, or ASF, ministry is only a few years old, given how robust and healthy the offerings now are. The Adult Spiritual Formation Committee has done yeoman's work in building out this ministry so quickly. I can personally attest to the relationships ASF small groups have allowed me to establish or strengthen, common bonds that are built through small group participation, and the opportunity to enhance or even challenge one's faith journey through small groups. It is simply a wonderful ministry, and if you ever hear that voice in your head nudging you to try a particular small group, acknowledge the call and give it a shot. You might not only get value from it yourself, your participation may also enrich the experience for others as well.

The third and final area of progress that I'll mention is Communications & Outreach. There are so many great strides we've made in this space over the past few years that I don't know where to begin – and frankly I'm afraid I'll leave something out! A brand-new, much more visually appealing and user-friendly website; a staff person dedicated to communication efforts; a huge revamp of our sanctuary's audio/video equipment and capability; a vastly improved social media presence; an incredibly dedicated and hard-working group of outreach ambassadors. And of course, building an entire virtual community from that starting point 2 years and 3 months ago of "How in the heck can we start broadcasting our worship services online to reach a congregation that can no longer come into our building for the time being?" What remarkable progress we have made in a relatively short period of time! So hear the Lord calling you – these improvements have opened so many new avenues for participating in the life of the church, whether in person or online, and keeping up with what's going on.

To be clear, these are not the only places where I feel our church is strong. We have many things to be proud of that extend beyond the 3 areas I've mentioned here. These 3 are just the ones in which I believe we seen the biggest steps forward since I began serving on Session.

But I did mention earlier that there is an area which concerns me. As you all are aware, we have those 4 words that we mention at the beginning of every service, that we include in the bulletin every week, that are meant to be our goals, what we are continually striving to be: inclusive, curious, compassionate, and courageous. By definition, we'll never be perfect in any of these respects, but we'll always be seeking to get better at all of them. This implies that at any given time, we may be doing better at some of them than others.

Though all 4 of these words are at times challenging to live into, the most challenging among them may very well be the first of them: inclusive. Yes, it's easy to say "we're inclusive", but often we define inclusivity in a limited, or even exclusive, manner. Inclusivity is about not just the demographical categories we often associate it with; it's about every aspect of an individual, including what they think and feel. How often in our society have you heard people or groups claim to be inclusive, and then proceed to ignore or shut down anyone who has a different perspective from their own? Sadly, it happens all too frequently.

TPC, we have to fight the urge to fall into this trap. We cannot become a church that even implicitly says "We don't want people who think like THAT to be a part of our community." But I do see signs of us heading in that direction. A diversity of thoughts and opinions is a healthy thing for any organization, including a church. Let's make sure we're embracing that notion. Let's be open to differing opinions from our own. What could be more Christian than listening to people who may have different, even opposing beliefs from your own, and loving those people nevertheless? I believe God is calling us – as a church and as individuals – to rise above the partisanship that so dominates, and in many ways is destroying, our society, and become examples of how to be respectful of one another and even find common ground and places to compromise.

The way we progress as a society is not through people on the extremes pushing us all to further polarization. It's through the majority of us who reside somewhere between the extremes hearing one another out and finding middle ground. I've seen that happen at times on Session and elsewhere in the life of our church, no doubt; but I've also experienced times when I've felt shut out or marginalized, and I'm sure others feel likewise. So let's put a little more emphasis – and maybe a little broader definition – on inclusivity and see if we can set the tone for our society.

Samuel missed God's first call to him...and the second...and the third. But God persisted, because he knew that Samuel would be capable of the remarkable things God was calling him to do. But Samuel was to become a great prophet – surely God doesn't call to us "normal people", right? Absolutely he does! These calls don't have to be for some huge undertaking or major change in one's life, although they could be. More often, God is calling us in the everyday, in simpler things like how we act towards others, how we think about a particular topic, how we participate in the life of the church – or our family, or our workplace, or our community.

But how often do we miss or misconstrue these calls? I almost pushed away the one I received 5 ½ years ago, and yet finally recognizing it and answering it allowed me to find a new voice and a new role in the leadership of our church, something I will always cherish and value.

What is God calling you to, large or small? I urge you to listen for that still small voice in your head or that nagging feeling in your gut. It's ok to question it, maybe even wrestle with it a bit. But know that God calls each of us, his beloved, to things large and small. We need to be ready to recognize those calls when they come, for surely they do and they will. Amen.