

"Action and Response"

Deuteronomy 26:1-3, 10b-11; Philippians 1:3-11
Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus
July 5, 2015 – 6th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Let me start our reflection today with some words from Dag Hammarskjöld: "I don't know who—or what—put the questions. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember responding. But at some moment I did answer yes to Someone—or Something—and from that hour it was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in responsive self-surrender, had a goal."

Here's one man responding to a call he felt deeply. It reminds us that so much of life is built on initiation and response. You knock on a door, and you wait for a response. You send out an invitation, and you wait for the response. A teacher poses a question before the class, and waits for a response. The gardener plants some seeds in the garden, and waits for a response. The doctor sends a bit of tissue to be tested, and waits for a response. The salesperson gives her best pitch, and waits for a response.

So much of life is based on response, on action and reaction. Both of our scripture readings for today remind us that our faith calls for response, too. In fact, reaction is the critical element.

In writing to the church at Philippi, Paul acknowledges the affection that he has for this people. Philippi was a Macedonian city located about ten miles from the Aegean Sea, and as such, is the first known Christian congregation in Europe.

The church there appears to have been almost entirely Gentile and with little Jewish influence. Despite circumstances which made Paul cut short his first visit, the church took root and became the only congregation that regularly was able to support his work financially. Paul stayed in touch with these friends through letters and through their regular gifts, which were brought by such members as Epaphroditus.

As is customary in Paul's letters, he begins with a greeting and then a thanksgiving. I read this to you just a few moments ago. You could consider it a response of gratitude to the whole of that community for their shared ministry together.

As he always remembers them in his prayers, he is also grateful that they hold him close in theirs. Despite the imprisonment and set-backs he has encountered, their steadfast love for him and their witness to the Gospel are a continual encouragement. For everything they have done, for the genuine friendship they offer, for the sincerity of their faith, he can make no more natural response than one of thanksgiving.

Paul understood how to show his appreciation, and did it in a sincere and clear way. He felt a strong affinity in faith with the Philippians and knew their love for him. He sent that love right back in his letters and prayers. Action and reaction. Initiation and response.

Such love and caring is not limited to the ancient world. There's a touching story of an Eastern Orthodox priest by the name of Father Demetrius. Now this pastor was a good and sensitive man. He had been given a special gift of discerning the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of his parishioners. Demetrius was able to detect God's hand in ordinary events so that the people could come to see and recognize the Lord's activity among them.

One day an uprising occurred in his city, causing extensive damage and injuring hundreds. Many in his parish were affected by the unrest, and one family lost everything they owned. They lost their home, their business, their furniture, their clothing—everything. Friends and relatives provided what assistance they could, but it didn't really replace all that they had lost.

Father Demetrius responded by doing what he could personally. One of those things he did was to take the youngest daughter shopping. She needed such basic items as shoes, socks, dresses, and a coat. These Father Demetrius bought for her. Then, with the little remaining money he had, he took her to a jewelry store and bought her a ring.

Now the pretty little band did not go unnoticed. When the people of the community heard about the foolish extravagance of the priest, they began to talk behind his back and chided him for the purchase of a piece of jewelry. They said, "He is a good man, a kind person, but to buy a ring of all things in such a situation is foolish indeed." Some people were even so upset that a delegation approached him to put forth their objections.

The group stated their concern as they shook their heads in disbelief. They waited for his reply. Finally he said quietly, but with no hint of regret: "This little one has suffered a tragic intrusion upon childhood; she needs something good in return. In buying the necessities I showed her the concern we have for her survival. In buying the ring, I showed her an example Christian love which goes beyond simply doing the least required. The world may take away, but God restores; not just life, but hope."

The villagers looked at each other then departed without saying a word, chagrined for their rush to judgment. They had considered only the immediate cost of the ring; Father Demetrius understood that God also provides beauty to offset our pain.

Action and reaction. Initiation and response .

Our other text for today takes us further back in time than Paul. It returns us to when the Hebrew people were still in the formative stage of understanding their special relationship with God. Here are instructions for what the people are to do in gratitude when they are finally brought to the promised land.

Moses says that they are to take the first of their crops which the land has produced and offer them in tribute to God. And as they do so, they are to recite these words of remembrance: "My ancestor was a wandering Aramean, who took his family to Egypt to live. They were few in numbers when they went there, but they became a large and powerful nation.

"The Egyptians treated us harshly and forced us to work as slaves. Then we cried out for help to the Lord, the God of our ancestors. He heard us and saw our suffering, hardship, and misery. By his great power and strength he rescued us from Egypt. He worked miracles and wonders, and caused terrifying things to happen. He brought us here and gave us this rich

and fertile land, a land of milk and honey. So now I bring to the Lord the first part of the harvest he has given me."

The words were henceforth to be repeated because they would remind the people why they do what they do. There is reason behind the ritual. They must not forget. God has taken the first step, and they the second. God has brought them to where they are and given them a place where they can prosper. What could be more appropriate than to give in return? Why should they not offer the best when they have received the best?

From bondage as slaves in Egypt to living as free persons, from indenture to bountiful prosperity, the Hebrew people have much to be thankful for. The offering of the grain and the vegetables and the fruit are really a way of acknowledging God's graciousness in their lives.

Action and reaction. Initiation and response.

An outstanding film from a few years back, and which many of us have seen, is the movie *Places in the Heart*. Sally Fields won the Best Actress award for her performance as a widow struggling during the Depression to provide for her family. When life seems to be telling her at every turn that things can't be done, she replies all the stronger that they can.

This story opens and closes in a similar way, with the people of the town worshipping in a small church. To me that initial scene and the final scene are like an invocation and a benediction. In between those two markers is an affirmation that the world's powers cannot truly overtake hurting people **if** they can reach out to receive the strength offered them. It is a story about learning to say "yes" in spite of everything that tempts one to say "no."

Action and reaction, initiation and response.

Whether it be the Hebrew people or the Philippian people or the Highlands people, all good gifts come to us from God and should flow back again in grateful reciprocation. We give our words, we give our praise, we give our service, we give our resources because God first gave us life and meaning. God's action, our reaction. God's initiation, our response. What could be more natural than returning our best when we realize the abundance of gifts that have already come to us?