

“Lasting Values Provide the Basis for Lasting Truth”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church

For Second Sunday of Epiphany, January 15, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 49:1-7

Matthew 3:13-17

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

It is a debate that keeps on giving: the debate of “nurture” versus “nature.” Are we who we are due to how we have been raised, or are we who we are based on the personality we have in our genetic makeup?

Yes, we are different depending on where we live, for economic and cultural opportunities do impact us – positively or negatively. But what is the primary cause of our development and attributes?

Now the nature side of the debate emphasizes our biological make-up – our genes and hereditary factors that lead to our physical appearance, health issues, and personality characteristics. Nurture refers to all of the environmental variables that impact who we are, including our early identity with our parents and family, the way we were treated as a child and how we were loved or left alone, our social relationships, and surrounding culture, habits, and social realities.

Biological psychology emphasizes the importance of genetics and biological influences, while behaviourism, on the other hand, focuses on the impact that one’s environment has on behaviour.

Now too strong an identity with nature can lead to some troubling ideas, including the desire to develop some kind of super race. Psychologist Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, coined the term *nature versus nurture*, and also sought what he terms *eugenics* – the development of a higher genetic pool by having more intelligent individuals marrying and having children, while less intelligent individuals should be discouraged from reproducing.

All of this talk leads to significant debates as to how we can determine what is the best way to educate young children, and how do we determine and meet their needs. It also determines how we expect to be able to fulfill all that is expected in our lives, and even our ability to be open to God and to God’s expectations.

The prophet Isaiah in the passage read earlier is clear that his call comes from the very creation of him – even before birth, he was called by God when still in the womb. And even though he has gone through challenges and upsets he can still affirm: “surely my cause is with the Lord and my reward with my God.”

And when Jesus is baptized, there is a dramatic affirmation of who he is, a promise that he will be the promised one.

Surely it is proof positive that nature, genetics, formation determines a person, not the environment. Yet as we look at the life of Jesus, and I expect the life of any person, no

matter how gifted, there is a nurturing aspect to a successful life. Nurture may not define us, necessarily, but it helps us in identifying and shaping that identity in our call to serve.

As the Presidency of Barak Obama concludes this week, many networks are making retrospective shows about his time in office, and highlighting as well the role that his wife, Michelle, played as the first lady.

In 2008 after a primary win, Michelle and Barak were shown with a fist-pump in congratulating one another on-stage. Not the usual hug or kiss for a political couple, the response to this action was immediate and drastic. *The New Yorker* magazine, usually offering a respected satirical look at history and the world, portrayed them on the cover as a female terrorist bomber and an Arab terrorist.

Michelle faced other criticisms. Her open and assertive style led people to say she was pushy, uppity, and stuck in a sense of privilege. Her wardrobe was analyzed, and people questioned the verity of her response when she proclaimed on the *Tonight Show* that she was not wearing a \$60,000 dress, but a J.R. Crew coordinated outfit.

So pervasive and upsetting were the comments about her that lacked truth and substance that she would have gone mad and been constantly upset had she not gone back to basics, and ask herself anew, as she proclaimed when receiving an honorary doctorate at Bowie State University in 2013: "Who am I and what are my God-given talents that I am to share with others in this life?"

Yes, not just prophets or Messiahs need to be grounded in what is their God given call and God's expectations for them, but we all need that grounding and understanding.

We may not be a prophet, or even a first lady, but the truth is each one of us faces times when we need to go back to basics to be clear about where God is calling us. Each one of us, at times, face situations where we may be unsure, confused, feeling rejected or at least taken advantage of, and we wonder how we have got into such a predicament.

The readings for today remind us that the focus should not be on "woe is me" if we want helpful answers, but on "what are my God-given skills, gifts, opportunities, calling?" that I somehow have lost track of in the way in which life has unfolded. Once we are clear about what is our purpose, we can live that purpose in healthy and uplifting ways.

The baptism of Jesus was a time of significant and unique calling for the one to be known as the Messiah. But it was not an action isolated and alone in the annals of history. Each one of us is called to something unique and special, and we need to be open to that calling, no matter what our experience in life.

Remaining convinced that one is called and blessed is not a Jesus phenomenon – it is a human phenomenon, and one we should never lose sight of no matter what has happened in our journey.

Maintaining clarity of the values that we hold, and what is important for our life, helps us to rise to new opportunities each and every day.

God be with you in that search for value and truth.