

2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time + I Sam 3:3b-10, 19 + I Cor 6:13-15, 17-20 + Jn 1:35-42

Our first reading today from the 1st book of Samuel, chapter 3, is a pleasant story about Samuel's call by God. But there is much more to the story which we don't hear, that is important background to truly understand the brief reading we just heard. In fact, this story has important lessons for all of us: parents, grandparents, and clergy alike.

To begin, while the figure of Eli takes second place to Samuel in our 1st reading, I want to focus primarily on Eli today. Eli is an Old Testament priest, a father of two sons, and a very old man. Because the priesthood at that time was passed on based on heredity, Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were also priests. And they were wicked men. They ignored the ritual laws, which governed the way the priests were to offer sacrifices. Because priests could not own land at that time, they were to be given part of the sacrifices offered by the people for sustenance. But they took more than their fair share of the portions that they were to receive. They committed lewd actions at the entrance to the tent of meeting—which was the dwelling place of the glory of God at that time—which was an abomination. To sum it up, Scripture says devastatingly: they *did not know the Lord*.

Now Eli, on the other hand, seems to be a decent enough father. He was troubled by the wickedness of his sons, and so he warned them to change their ways, lest they die in a state of grave sin. But the two sons paid no attention to their father. And therein lies Eli's eventual downfall. Even though he warned his sons to change their ways, it seems that he was too weak to really *do anything* about it when they failed to listen to him. Evidently, Eli had the power to remove his sons from the priestly office, but failed to do so. There is also an inference that Eli himself benefitted from his sons' unethical and excessive taking of the sacrificial food that did not belong to them. But perhaps the greatest mistake that Eli made, the one that really led to his downfall was this: even though he knew his sons would be priests someday, it seems that he did not teach them to know the Lord.

At this point, let's draw a few insights for parents from the life of the priest Eli. Our first lesson is this: parents must discipline their children. This seems like a no-brainer, but there is a strange current out there today that suggests all discipline is mean and that children should not be disciplined, lest they feel bad. Now certainly, there can be excessive discipline. Obviously, I'm not advocating that. But children need dad and mom to teach them what is right, and what is wrong. They need parents to teach them that our actions have consequences; sometimes consequences that stay with us for a lifetime. There are countless Scripture passages making this point: for example, the book of Proverbs says, *Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it (22:6)*, or the Letter to the Hebrews says, *what son is there whom his father does not discipline...for the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (12:7b, 11)*.

Even more, children need their parents to teach them the supremely important truths of our faith, such as what we heard from St. Paul in our 2nd reading today: *The body is not for immorality, but for the Lord*. Because if parents do not teach them this, no one else will. Now yes, our school and faith formation programs try to do this, which is one of the reasons we are offering the Protect Young Eyes event tomorrow evening. But not one can or should replace the role of parents in forming young consciences. Our society no longer believes in right and wrong; all morality seems to be up for vote or a matter of feelings. But this is a horrible way to live, and our young people are the ones who are suffering for it.

Next, the story of Eli and his sons teaches us that parents must do their best to help their children to know the Lord. Sometimes, parents think they do not know enough about the Faith to do this. But it doesn't take a PhD in theology to know the Lord. Children need to learn how to pray. They need to know the commandments, how and why they are so important, and how grace and virtue helps us to keep them. They need to know that Jesus loves them more than they can ever imagine, and always will. And they need to know that our faith is not just a matter of feelings or "what I get out of it", but our need to worship God and thank Him for all the blessings He pours out on us each day. And the best way they come to know these things is to see faith, hope, and love lived out every day in the lives of their parents and grandparents; not perfectly, but doing the best as they can.

And this brings us to our next lesson, which I think is especially relevant for grandparents. Young people need help to know how to recognize God's voice when He calls them, just as Eli helped Samuel to hear God's voice. It is true, Eli did not do a perfect job with his children. Perhaps some of you have regrets regarding things you could have done better raising your own children. Now Eli wasn't Samuel's grandfather; he was more like a spiritual grandfather, or a godfather. But God placed Samuel in Eli's life for a purpose. Maybe it was even to offer him another chance. At any rate, grandparents often have a very powerful impact on the lives of their grandchildren. You can be like Andrew in our Gospel today, bringing your grandchildren to meet Jesus. You may be the only person of faith that they encounter in their daily lives! And never doubt that God still effects conversions in the lives of His children. Even grown-up ones. There is always reason to hope.

Now I realize we are asking a lot of parents here, so I need to say that the most distressing lesson from the story of Eli is the warning that is given to members of the clergy. Those who would receive the call to act on behalf of God Himself as ordained clergy must carry an enormous responsibility. Eli, Hophne, and Phinehas felt the full weight of God's punishment for their failure to honestly carry out their office, and for the suffering that they caused the People of God. Yes, God is a God of mercy, but there will be a judgment someday, which will be especially weighty for we who act on behalf of God Himself.

The final lesson; what Eli did right. When we pray, which must be every day, we should say: *Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening*. And then listen.