

May I Ask Who's Calling?
Ash Wednesday Saint Marks UMC February 10, 2015
Isaiah 58:6-10; Psalms 50-51

George Peters knew what it takes to be a successful salesman. The years of his sales work for a well known national corporation spoke for themselves. Since his second year with the company -- and that was 36 years ago -- he had led the sales totals every year in his district, and had been in the top 5 sales reps nationwide for almost as many years.

But now, there was a new young district manager, who saw that his own future extended well past the retirement age of George Peters, So this young executive, Geoffery Comstock, called Peters into his office one day to discuss the future.

George, you're a great salesman -- you always have been. Do you know why?" asked Comstock.

You mean -- other than because I sell a great product with a great service department to back it up? George Peters replied.

Yes, other than that. All of our sales force has the same product with the same service department. But you always excel. I'm a manager, not a salesman. So I can't do it, but I recognize when it is done well. I'm not going to beat around the bush. Your sales make me look good -- and I like that. But you're not going to be around my whole career to do that.

So, I have an offer for you. I'll pay you in straight salary 20% more than you made last year in salary and commission if you will continue to service your present customers and train the rest of the sales force to be as good as you. And when you retire, you can tell me how to divide your customers. What do you think?

George Peters didn't have to think about it very long. It wasn't just the extra money and the release from the obligation to develop new customers. It also appealed to him to be able to pass on his secrets -- to *leave his legacy: the George Peters Way of Sales.*

He began his new assignment the following week. Geoffery Comstock sent out the memo directing the 10 other sales reps to meet with Peters on Wednesday of that week. All gathered, they heard Peters explain -- with modesty but frankly -- the results of his past 30-some years. Then he told them, *I am going to be working myself out of a job fairly soon. My territory will be divided up between some of you. In the meanwhile I am willing to meet with you and share the secrets of my sales strategies. I'll meet with you on a weekly basis -- Mondays from 7:30 -8:30 am. At other times, I'll be available to consult with any of you who want to discuss things with me. The meetings are not required. But if you want to participate, I will see you here next Monday morning at 7:30 SHARP.*

The following Monday, 8 of the 10 were in the training room at 7:30 -- sharp. There was never any explanation nor excuse given by the 2 absent ones. George began to talk:

I have 10 simple rules that are the foundation of my sales work. I can't tell you why these rules work. Oh, I have some ideas, but whenever I have tried to explain it, it never seems to make sense, so I've given up trying to explain the why. I just give you the hows.

I will tell you this much -- if you follow these rules and all 10 of them, two things will happen: (1) you WILL be successful, and (2) you, also, will begin to see the connection between following them and being successful. Even if you can't explain the relationship, you will begin to understand it.

Whether you choose to follow these rules or not is left entirely up to you. I will neither defend them nor require them. You may pick and choose among them, but do so with the knowledge that nothing works so well as following all ten! You decide.

Here they are:

1. Remember: you sell more than just the product and the service -- you also sell yourself.
2. Know your product
3. Know yourself

4. Improve yourself:
 - (a) physically work out regularly
 - (b) mentally exercise your mind -- read something that stretches your mind, on a regular basis
 - (c) spiritually work out regularly here, too -- to keep in touch with the Source of your strength and the Owner of all material goods of which we are only stewards
5. Time management -- (a) be punctual; (b) never waste time; (c) return telephone calls promptly
6. Be prepared
7. Always look your best
8. Keep in contact with your customers -- call them regularly -- not just to sell, but to check on their pulse -- see how they are doing and how your product is doing -- just to let them know that you care. This is important: Schedule one hour every day from 8:30 - 9:30 am every day for making these contacts by telephone.
9. Be in your office every day at 7:00 am. And when you leave, don't take work home with you.
10. Share:
 - (a) we will come together for 1 hour each week to share with one another, so we can all grow together, as a team
 - (b) share your life with your family, your community, and Church
 - (c) Tithe

After giving a short explanation of each of these 10 rules, George dismissed them until their time next Monday at 7:30 am SHARP. Of the 8 sales reps present, their reactions were mixed. Some thought the rules were sound -- or at least part of the rules. Others thought the whole thing was too simplistic, and they resented that Peters was getting paid so much to do this *training*.

But since none of them knew how the gold mine of George Peters' sales territory was going to be divided up, they all (at least the original 8 of 10) came to the weekly meetings.

George kept tabs of his protégés. It was not too difficult for him to see which ones had chosen to follow the 10 rules. He could see it in their personal demeanor and their attitude -- and, even more demonstrably -- in their sales reports. Only he and Geoffery Comstock were privy to this information. And these reports were quite clear. The 8 who attended had all improved their sales. And some of the 8 improved a whole lot more than the others -- and their sales were consistently better.

But George did one other follow-up on his training. Routinely -- but at irregular intervals -- he would call the office of each sales rep sometime between 8:30 and 9:30 am. In many of the offices, the secretary would answer, *May I ask who's calling, please?*

But in a few of the offices -- and he knew which ones ahead of time, based on the sales reports -- the secretary would always say, *I'm sorry, she's on the phone right now. But she'll return your call just as soon as she gets off.*

In a few offices he got that response right off the bat. In the others, he would get a similar answer after he identified himself in response to, *May I ask who's calling?* If, however, he had someone else make the call for him, the call would be put right through.

Well, the conclusion of this story is not unforeseen. The sales reps who chose to follow all 10 rules clearly exceeded all the others who picked and chose amongst them and merely pretended about the others.

None of the 8 ever fully comprehended why these 10 particular rules worked. But a few of them had been willing to try all of them, just based on the fact that they had worked so well for George Peters. And these were the ones who found that success did come, even if the full understanding of how was still elusive.

Geoffery Comstock, the district manager, was pleased with the results. George Peters got an early retirement with a quite handsome golden parachute, with the stipulation that he would be available on a limited basis for continuing consultation. His

customers were divided between the 3 sales reps whose results set them apart from the others.

The story of George Peters says as much about life as it does about sales. In life, there are certain things that *plainly* and *simply just work*, even when we can't explain WHY they work.

Confession and repentance are like that. I don't know what it is about the human need for confession and why it is like it is. But I know well enough from my personal experience, my work in the Church, and even prior work as a prosecutor working closely with police in serious crime investigations. The best police interrogator was able to fulfill the role of a priest, and some of the hardest criminals fulfilled their need to make confession. There is a deep human need to make confession and until this is done, the human animal simply does not work well.

Fasting is another example. John Wesley refused to permit ordination any minister who did not regularly fast twice each week. For most people today, when I have discussed it, they say that they really don't understand what's so special about it. And, almost always, these people will say that they also have never tried it -- or did not ever try it on a regular basis.

And then, there is the whole season of Lent. Will Easter come only for those who take upon themselves the serious

commitment to fasting and self-denial and disciplined prayerful self-examination? No, Easter will come to all of us. God's Gifts are not controlled by us. But does Easter take on a wholly and holy different meaning if we seriously undertake the disciplines of Lent? **ABSOLUTELY!**

In our BAPTISM we put on Christ. In fasting and self-denial and daily soul-searching, we FOLLOW CHRIST from our baptism into the WILDERNESS. Somehow -- we end up becoming more Christ-like -- more like God created us to be -- and sent Jesus to demonstrate to us.

But, you might say, can't these exercises be simply surface and superficial acts of piety that are done without deep commitment? Yes, they can. And the same can be said for all the external practices of Christianity. But even then -- sometimes, often, the external and superficial habits have a way of sinking down into the depths of our soul and making a difference.

So why do we wear ashes, fast, commit to daily devotions and self-examination during Lent? For me -- it's a process that I can't explain the WHY; I just know that in it God works in mysterious and wonderful ways upon my soul, and my life is better.

BUT, you don't have to do it for me. You **DON'T HAVE TO ANSWER TO ME**. But, **SOMEDAY** you **DO** have to answer.

One day a call will come for each of us to answer. And we won't have the option of screening it through a secretary who asks *May I say who's calling, please?*

The gifts of ashes, fasting, and repentance are as old as the prophet Joel -- as prominent as the Example Jesus -- and so treasured that they have been preserved through all the centuries by Jesus' Bride: the Church. Tonight we begin another Lent. The gifts are offered, but not explained. The gifts are offered, but we are allowed by God to choose. Thanks be to God for the gift. Thanks be to God for the mystery of how they work. Amen.