

## **Sermon – February 7, 2010**

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What does it mean to be called by Christ? Is not my life vocation a response to that call? Does it lie in the desire to make it to church once in a while and participate where and when I can? Is it instantaneous or does it evolve over time? What prompts it? What sustains it? What are the implications?

Rick Warren hints at it somewhat. “Being successful and fulfilling your life’s purpose are not at all the same thing. You can reach all your personal goals, become a raving success by the world’s standard and still miss your purpose in this life.”

I immediately think of the rich young ruler. This man approaches Jesus and asks, “Teacher what good must I do to have eternal life?” “Which ones?” Jesus asks. After Jesus lists all of the commandments, the man says, confidently, “I have kept all these, what do I still lack?” In spite of his successful and fulfilling life by his and the world’s standards, there is a deeper hunger. Here Jesus toys with him and challenges him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Jesus saw the anguish in his face. Mark tells us that Jesus, looking at him, loved him. Matthew describes the man then turning away from Jesus, grieving. Why? The cost. He has many possessions. There he is torn between his deeper, unmet needs and the temporal security to which he so clings.

The call of Jesus is a full claim upon our lives. It places us square in that tension. It is not, however, coercive. We are left alone before God to freely choose. Pure grace and love come with the invitation.

Part of the mystery of God’s call lies in the efficacy of the words “follow me.” “Let there be light; and there was light.” (Genesis 1:3) Isaiah tells us that God insists that “my word . . . shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:11) For God, words are deeds. And those words have the power to call something into being.

The call of Jesus brings into being a community of people with whom he will shape his Kingdom to engage the world. It is a call grounded in eternity, accepted in time and unites us for eternity. Paul tells us in Ephesians that “he choose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ...” (Ephesians 1:45)

Our call is to be in relationship with a person. Jesus call to us is a call of love. Remember? Jesus looked at the rich young ruler and “loved him” as he said, “Come, follow me.” That was the one thing in my life which unlocked the door to becoming a Christian. I was being called into a relationship, a community of relationships, a place where I could experience that love and be a part of a community of people Jesus is calling to shape his Kingdom to engage the world. Relationship was the end, organization the means. Maybe that is what Robert Short means when he writes that “the church is the great *lost and found* department.” G.K. Chesterton admonishes us rightly to let our religion “be less of a theory and more of a love affair.”

Jesus, I believe, looks at the heart’s potential to love, not just ability. As the call of Christ to love and follow him began to deepen in my soul, I recall pondering, “Lord, there are so many others I see who appear to have greater abilities and gifts.” The two things which get in the way of an affirmative response to God’s call would be low self-esteem (“I’m not good enough, unqualified”) or too much self-esteem (“I’m too good for this”).

So who qualifies to be called? Let’s back up and think what qualifies us for most things in life. Most educational institutions and service clubs state specific requirements. In Jesus’ day no rabbi went out looking for students. They came to the rabbis, begging to be allowed to study. Prospective students were questioned in detail, to be approved by the rabbis. Very few made the cut. No time was to be wasted with the illiterate or the average person. One had to show potential.

Jesus’ way is different. Jesus chooses us. “I chose you, you didn’t choose me,” Jesus tells his disciples. (John 15:16) What a day that must have been. “As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers...and he called them. One set of brothers were fishing, the others mending their nets. They immediately left their nets and the boat with their father in it and followed him. Now I imagine that these men had heard Jesus speak in the

neighborhood and had listened in on the scuttlebutt about him. He wasn't unfamiliar. Some seeds, I suspect, had been sown.

They were average people whose hearts were prepared and receptive. We witness them in the gospels as not especially courageous, no great ambitions, easily caught up in petty quarrels, yet capable of being challenged, willing to sacrifice for a cause, be honest and grow. They were open to spiritual formation.

And it is true that most who followed Jesus weren't that impressive. The religious leaders asked, "Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in him?" (John 7:48)

Listen to what Paul says; "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters; not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth..." I would agree with Dale Brunner who observed that "the power that makes disciples is not the human potential of Peter and Andrew; it is the spiritual potency of the Word." We don't come to the Lord by our own initiative alone. The Lord comes to us first.

Kathleen Norris, in her book, Amazing Grace, writes that "Joining a church is not like joining a hobby club; you will find all sorts of people there, not all of whom will share your interests, let alone your opinions." The church, that place where people called by Jesus gather and he is in their midst, is "a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate." (Bonhoeffer, Life Together, p. 30) We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ. Christ stands between us. I need others because of Jesus Christ and I come to others only through Jesus Christ. As Head of the Church, Christ determines the mission and purpose of the community. Bonhoeffer talks about the danger of imposing my "wish dream" upon the community, what my ego might demand the church to look like and the kind of people I want here rather than being open to the Holy Spirit's definition and leading of what God wants. But it is here we encounter one another as we are, not as we wish others to be. Jesus Christ begins with who I am and proceeds from there.

Jesus not only calls us to himself (follow me) as a one time event, but he calls us to a continuous walk with him. ("Follow" is a Greek verb in the present-tense imperative expressing continuity and means "live a life following me." (Brunner, Matthew, p. 144) Jesus' call is not just about experiencing our own personal salvation and growth but to a ministry with

others; “I will make you fish for people.” We are called to reach outside of ourselves to others. It’s a call to engagement. The whole direction of our lives is changed. I remember that my questions changed. Not what I want and God please bless it, but “God, what is it that you are asking me to do, to become ?” Those called by Jesus left their nets and boats and followed him, no matter where he led. Jesus’ call disrupted their lives and may disrupt ours as well. As we witnessed earlier, the rich young ruler, though despondent, wasn’t willing in the end to let his life be disrupted. He remained a religious man, I assume, but not a changed one.

Philip Yancey describes his meeting with a pastor who while serving in World War II, had participated in the liberation of the Dachau Concentration Camp. The pastor describes the experience of his call by Christ:

“A Buddy and I were assigned to one boxcar. Inside were human corpses, stacked in neat rows, exactly like firewood. Our job was like moving furniture to a designated area. I spent two hours in the boxcar, and the negative emotions came in waves, all but the rage. It stayed, fueling our work. Then we turned our attention to the SS officers in charge of Dachau, who were being held under guard in a bunkhouse. The captain asked for a volunteer to escort a group of twelve SS prisoners to an interrogation center nearby. A few minutes after they disappeared into the trees, we heard the rattley burp of a machine gun. Soon, Joe, the volunteer, came strolling out, smoke still curling from the tip of his weapon. “They all tried to run away,” he said with a kind of leer.

It was on that day that I felt called by God to become a pastor. First, there was the horror of the corpses in the Boxcar. I knew beyond doubt that I must spend my life serving whatever opposed such evil – serving God.

Then came the incident with Joe. I had a nauseating fear that the captain might call on me to escort the next group of SS guards, and an even more dread fear that if he did, I might do the same as Joe. The beast that was within those guards was also within me.

I do see a connection in my work now. Without being melodramatic, I sometimes wonder what might have happened if a skilled, sensitive person had befriended the young, impressionable, Adolph Hitler as he wandered the streets of Vienna in his confused state. The world might have been spared

that bloodshed – spared Dachau. I never know who might be sitting in that chair you're occupying right now.

And even if I end up spending my life with nobodies, I learned in the boxcar that there's no such thing. I learned that day in Dachau what 'the image of God' in a human being is all about" (Yancey, Grace Notes, p.59)

That sums up the reality of Christ's call. We follow a person, not a principle. Life can no longer be lived the same. We are called in community with others in the execution of God's redemptive purpose in the world. We're part of God's great *lost and found* department. People become ends, not means. All are important from the least to the greatest. We become part of something far bigger than ourselves which has eternal significance. Here we learn humility as Christ is in our midst leading us all in our diversity as one in him.