

"Being Called For"

Third Sunday after Epiphany – Lectionary 3

8:15 and 11:00 a.m. Sunday, January 22, 2012

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Mark 1:14–20

The classified ad from a major metropolitan newspaper read as follows:

HOT TUB – for sale, complete with plumbing.
Will trade for a pick-up truck. Call Tony after
5:00 p.m.

Now, one doesn't have to be a therapist to suspect that, behind those words, there lays a life in major

transition. Away with the hot tub, the gold chains, the Old Spice, the Civic, the wine coolers; in with the baseball cap, the Coors lite, the flannel shirt, the Polo, and the Chevy half-ton pick-up.

Furthermore, one doesn't have to have a Ph. D. in sociology to recognize that we live in a culture rip with these kinds of transformations, what are sometimes called "lifestyle changes." People all across America are becoming vegetarians, taking up jogging or yoga, leaving their families, changing careers, entering mid-life crises, getting the biggest TV they can find, "getting into" therapy, learning to be more sensitive, and making scores of other adjustments to the compass settings of their life-journeys.

Now, it could be rather easy to become cynical about such changes. Many of them border on the faddish side, containing more of conformity than conversion

about them. Cyra McFadden satirized such behavior in her novel The Serial. The story line is set in the plastic-coated world of beautiful people, all of them frantically trying to fine-tune their social lives to the latest craze. For example, two of the characters plan a party around the renewal of their marriage “contract,” as they called it, and sent the following invitation to their friends:

*Kate Smith and Harvey Holroyd request your presence
at a Spring Festival –*

*A celebration of Open Commitment and feeling
exchange where we can just be.*

*Come affirm with us our belief that in life, it's the
journey that counts, not the goal.*

Now, besides wanting to go barf somewhere, we may laugh at that kind of parody and brand it as superficial, but I suspect there is more to it than simple faddishness. It is true that many of our own attempts

at change are laughably shallow, but taken and examined as markers of the human condition, they point, I think, to a deeper restlessness. However trivial they may appear, the changes people make in their lives are often signs of a crucial, frequently desperate, sometimes courageous *search*. If that is true, then the question becomes: what is it that we are searching for? What is it that causes anyone of us to contemplate important changes in our lives? What motivates us to leave a place of settled circumstances and values, and to venture off into a new and uncharted region?

Well, some of the shifts people make in their lives are simply rebellions against boredom. They are not planned trips to a new destination; they are simply tickets on the first bus out of town. In Herb Gardner's play A Thousand Clowns, Murray Burns, a disorganized, and voluntarily free spirit, is explaining to Arnold, his disciplined and socially conventional brother, that it was

the fear of numbing boredom which drove him to abandon the traditional “nine to five” life. He says to Arnold:

“Arnold, five months ago I forgot what day it was. I’m on the subway on my way to work and I didn’t know what day it was. For a moment, it could have been any day. . . Arnie, it scared the _____ out of me!”

Let me quickly add, however, that many people have grown weary of making changes simply to alleviate boredom. They have discovered that the problem with shaking the dust of boredom off one’s feet and heading out the door to who knows where is that leaving one place always means arriving at another place much like the first. One eventually has to show-up somewhere else, and that new place is likely to prove as tedium-filled as the last.

And this leads us right into another reason why some people make important changes in their lives: not so much to get away from a place of boredom, but rather to find a new place of greater meaning. This is not the kind of change in which a person simply heads out the door, slamming it on the way, but the kind in which a person yearns to become a citizen of a new and richer land. It is not a rebellion against boredom; it is a hunger to discover one's true self. I suspect that personal and religious renewals are often changes of this sort. When life is confusing and disorienting, we are often eager for it to find some grounding and stability, and often that is accomplished by losing ourselves in work or finding ourselves defined by what we do.

The problem with this kind of change is that when we go looking to "find ourselves," we often find ourselves

alone. There is a sadness in a culture like ours, have you noticed? A sadness which bravely trumpets the virtue of inner-directed, risk-taking, self-sufficient people who don't need anybody else in order to be fully human, and which, at the same time, is full of aching lonely people. And so, people make courageous changes in their lives trying to "get their act together," only to make the bitter discovery that they have written themselves into the starring role in a one-person play with no audience.

It is a worthy goal, I suppose, to want to be "one's own person." No one wants to be pushed around, overwhelmed, and controlled by the demands of others. But there is a deeper sense in which none of us finally wants to "be our own person." We long to hear the sound of another's voice summoning us, valuing our life enough to make a claim upon it.

I'm sure that we have all heard the phrase: "That was uncalled for!" It is usually spoken by parents to misbehaving children. That is a strange phrase, when you think about it, but it points, I believe, to the source of our restless searching and our most gripping fear. There is a dread in our hearts deeper than the fear of boredom, greater than the anxiety that we will not forge a satisfying "self," and that is the fear that we will ultimately be "uncalled for." This is the fear that no one will ever turn to us and say, "Come, I want you. I need you in my life." This is the fear that who we are, and what we say, and what we do does not matter to anyone else. Like neighborhood children choosing up sides for a game, each desperately worried about being the last one chosen, we make most of the changes in our lives in an effort to make ourselves desirable enough to be summoned by another.

In this light, and I realize that it took me a long time to get there this morning, in this light, the story of Jesus passing along the sea, calling Simon and Andrew, James and John, is a moment of sheer wonder and grace. We are told nothing of the inner lives of these men. We do not know if they were restless or tranquil, bored or at peace with their lives. What is important is not what was going on in them, but what happened *to* them. And what happened to them was this: they were *called for*. It was a call bigger than self, broader than occupation, deeper than family. It was a call from Jesus, the Son of God, the Christ. They were not called for because they had somehow made themselves desirable or competent. They were called for because it is the very life of God to call his people. "Follow me," said Jesus, "and I will send you calling, too." What happened, of course, was that they made the most profound change a person can make – they followed him.

Some of you might recognize the name, Bruce Kennedy. He was the chief executive officer of the highly successful Alaska Air Group, the parent company of Alaska Airlines. During the twelve years under Kennedy's leadership, the corporation's revenues grew tenfold. When he took the helm the airline was floundering and nearly bankrupt. But in twelve short years, he brought transformation to the organization and saw it become one of the most profitable and best-run airlines in the world.

Then, at the peak of his success, he made a shocking decision. He stepped down from his lofty corporate position to become the board chairman of the Redlands, California-based, Mission Aviation Fellowship, an international Christian organization that specializes in flying missionaries to remote locations. Kennedy's new position had no salary at all; he was a volunteer.

Though Bruce Kennedy is quick to admit that his was a scary decision, it was also a decision that was driven by a clear inner sense of calling. After twelve years as CEO he decided he wanted to spend the rest of his life doing what God wanted him to do. Here is how he explained his move: "If I say that I trust God and put my life in his hands . . . then I shouldn't have any reservations about proving it with my life."

Most of us would think that being the CEO of a major corporation would be enough for our lives to have meaning. But it's not enough, ever. There is something more. And it has to do with that call of God to use the gifts and talents he has given us to make this world a better place. It is to lay our lives at the foot of the cross and to have those lives become cruciform in their living. It is to say to God, "Use me, Lord. Show me how to serve right here, right now."

“Follow me,” said Jesus, “and I will send you fishing in my name.”

My friends in Christ, that summons comes to all of us. For some it will come as a call to leave our nets, our books, our desks, our homes. For others it will come as a call to mend our nets more carefully, read our books more thoroughly, mind our desks more faithfully, live in our homes more lovingly. But in whatever form, it *has come and will continue to come*, the summons to forsake being our “own person,” and to become Christ’s. And when we hear it, we can be sure that the One who loves us best, and cherishes our life most fully, has come near, and, in the deepest of ways, we have been called for.

AMEN.

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