

Church of the Crossroads  
Third Sunday after Epiphany  
January 27, 2008  
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“CALLED”

1 Corinthians 1:18-31  
Matthew 4:12–23

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people. Immediately they left their nets and followed him. (Mt 4:18–20)

Imagine that! In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:

And what does the text inform us about the content of discipleship? Follow me, run along behind me! That is all. To follow in his steps is something which is void of all content. It gives us no intelligible programme for a way of life, no goal or ideal to strive after. It is not a cause which human calculation might deem worthy of our devotion, even the devotion of ourselves . . . <sup>1</sup>

How different this is from the conventional understanding of vocation in our secular society. We view vocation as a career. And a career is something we ourselves choose. We sit down with a counselor, perhaps, and figure out our strengths and skills and goals, and then we choose a suitable career for ourselves, sometimes with regard for the common good, and often without. How American! Even the ordained ministry is viewed as a career! I have sometimes been asked, “What made you choose pastoral ministry as a career?” And if ordained ministry is viewed as a career, it then follows that pastors are offered contracts by the churches that employ them. After a four-year period, there is a big evaluation, and another contract is offered, or the pastor is dismissed.

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959) 58.

I am glad to say that Church of the Crossroads has never followed suit. Crossroads has never “employed” its pastors. Nor has it ever offered them contracts. Church of the Crossroads “calls” its pastors and the call is open-ended. The call lasts as long as the covenant between pastor and people is in place. And that is the way it should be.

Pastoral ministry is a vocation, a calling, but not just pastoral ministry. Everyone who passes through the waters of baptism is called to ministry within the church, certainly, but even more so in the world. Everyone.

This morning, let us explore the meaning of “vocation – being called” from the point-of-view of the Gospel. To do so, I would like to share a story that Robert Coles relates in the opening chapter of his book, *The Call of Service*.<sup>2</sup> In 1960, six year-old Tessie was one of four black girls who initiated school desegregation in New Orleans. For months, Tessie, escorted by federal marshals, had to fight her way through angry, threatening mobs, as she made her way to McDonough 19 School. Obscenities were commonplace, and also threats that she was going to die one day soon.

One day, Tessie decided that she had had enough. For just one day, she wanted to stay home. Her mother and father had already gone to work, and Tessie was in the kitchen with Martha, her grandmother, whose task it was to keep things together at home. Her grandmother said that “yes, that would be OK” if Tessie was really sick. But if she was more discouraged than sick, that was another matter.

“It’s no picnic, child—I know that, Tessie—going to that school, Lord Almighty, if I could just go with you, and stop there in front of that building, and call all those people to my side, and read to them from the Bible and tell them, remind them, that He’s up there, Jesus, watching over all of us—it don’t matter who you are and what your skin color is. But I stay here, and you go . . . So I’m not the one to tell you that you should go, because here I am, and I’ll be watching television and eating or cleaning things up while you’re walking by those folks. But I’ll tell you, you’re doing them a service, a big service.” (p 2)

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Coles. *The Call of Service*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1003)

The grandmother's words are interrupted when a bee appears in the kitchen. She manages to stun the bee, picks it up with a tissue and takes it outside, where it flies off.

Then she speaks again to Tessie:

“You see, my child, you have to help the good Lord with his world! He puts us here—and He calls us to help Him out. That bee doesn't belong here; it belongs out there. You belong in that McDonough School, and there will be a day when everyone knows that, even those poor folks—Lord, I pray for them!—those poor, poor folks who are out there shouting their heads off at you. You're one of the Lord's people; He's put His Hand on you. He's given a call to you, a call to service—in his name! There's all those people, scared out of their minds, and by the time you're ready to leave the McDonough School they'll be calmed down, and they won't be paying you no mind at all, child, and I'll guarantee you, that's how it will be!” (2–3)

Tessie finishes her breakfast, marches confidently to the sink with her dishes, puts them in a neat pile, and goes to get her raincoat and empty lunch pail from her room—all without saying a word. She is going to go to school.

She is following the call of Jesus, off to fish for people. With the Gospel story, and Tessie's story in mind, what can we say? In the first place, we can surely say that *everyone* is called. Peter and Andrew are called. Tessie is called, and so is her grandmother called. Paul reminds the members of the Corinthian Church that they are called. You are called, and so am I. Being called, in this sense, has nothing to do with being employed. Everyone, whether employed or not, has a calling. Everyone is called to follow Jesus.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book on discipleship, reminds us that after Christendom became established in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the call to discipleship lost its edge. Grace was cheapened and became a commodity dispensed by the Church. To be a Christian simply meant to a member of the Church. Later, the whole idea of vocation, of being called, became limited to those who belonged to monastic orders. Only monks were called. Conveniently, then, the Church could continue to dispense cheap grace to everyone else.

The Protestant Reformation, and Luther, in particular, restored the notion that everyone was called to discipleship. In his 1520 treatise *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, Luther wrote that not only churchly authorities but also temporal authorities are called by God to a “work and office.” He then went on to say that a

. . . cobbler, a smith, a peasant—each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops. Further, everyone must benefit and serve every other by means of his own work or office so that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, just as all the members of the body serve one another.<sup>3</sup>

Everyone is called. Everyone is called to discipleship in the world, everyone is called to serve, whether it be Tessie or those first disciples, whether it be you or me. We are all called.

Luther’s idea, however, did not fully take root. All too quickly, the churches of Protestantism returned to the idea that only clergy are truly called. Bonhoeffer would attribute this to a return to the cheap grace dispensed by a conventional Christianity. Wrote Bonhoeffer:

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate . . . Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*.<sup>4</sup>

Being called in the Christian sense, in the second place, then, exacts a cost. It puts us at odds with the world. Being called has very little in common with what is understood as choosing a career. To follow a career, to be successful in the sense of career, can easily lead to conformity with the way things are. We simply “cave in” and conform to the expectations the world has of us.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” 15.

<sup>4</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 44–45.

To be called as the disciples were called; to be called as Tessie was called, is quite another matter. It exacts a cost; it can lead us to discomfort, for to follow a calling is the way that God seeks to redeem the world through us. And there can be no safety in that. Tessie was called to play a part in the desegregation of the schools of New Orleans, and in order to fulfill her calling, she had to undergo personal suffering. The gospels describe it as taking up one's cross. Yes, to follow the call of Jesus is to place ourselves at odds with the world for the sake of the world.

But that is what it means to be called as the disciples were called, as Tessie was called. The call comes from a place outside ourselves, and we are compelled to follow. We can complain; we can hesitate, but in the end we follow, simply because the call comes not from ourselves, but from God.

Finally, in addition to the truth that everyone is called, and that following Jesus exacts a cost, we can also say that our particular context as a post-Christendom church gives us an opportunity to restore meaning and value to Christian discipleship, to what it means to "be called." For us, to be a Christian can no longer simply mean to be a member of the church. For us, there can be nothing automatic about being a follower of Jesus. It requires a decision. And that is good, for it is as we follow Jesus that we receive the gift of grace. We follow, thanks to the grace of God. The call comes from God and is affirmed by one another in the community of faith. We are called not to be successful in the eyes of the world, not to be important, not to be comfortable, but only to be faithful.

So it is that God in Jesus, the Christ, chooses you and me to be instruments of life in a world so dominated by death. Let us, my sisters and brothers, say "yes" to the calling, and trusting in God's own leading, fear not the falling. So may it be. Amen.