



“The Call to Discipleship”

Luke 5:27-32

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Second Sunday in Lent

In 1936, Dietrich Bonhoeffer finished a book he'd worked on for nearly a decade. The English translation of the book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, is still in print and still a powerful prophetic word to the church.

Bonhoeffer addressed his book to the German Church which, he believed, was captured by its culture, blinded by nationalism and trapped in traditions. The church was losing its soul to an alien Lord, National Socialism. Bonhoeffer issued a prophetic call to the church to hear the voice of the Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ, and to heed no other.

The first part of the book is based on the story of Jesus' call to Levi to discipleship – the story that is our Gospel Lesson this morning. With passion, prophetic fire and unrelenting prose, Bonhoeffer repeated Jesus' call to Levi addressed also to the German Church.

The church is always in danger of hearing and heeding the siren call of “alien” voices. The story of Levi and Jesus continues to do its subversive work now as it did then and in 1936. It challenges conventional religion then and now and challenges the “Spirit of the Age” in every generation. The church is always tempted to use religion for its own purposes in the service of its own causes.

Listen to the story and see what it might do to us in our time and in this place.

Levi, also known as Matthew, ran a small and profitable business in Capernaum. His business was collecting taxes. The Romans were geniuses as devising multiple ways of taxing the people they conquered. Levi collected an annual head tax, tolls on roads and bridges, taxes on goods and services, and property taxes. Levi taxed fishermen for their use of the road into Capernaum. He collected from merchants who traveled in and out of Capernaum, in addition to the other, often stifling taxes on the people.

The Romans let contracts for tax collecting and paid their collectors in advance. Tax collectors like Levi could take what they could get over and above what belonged to Rome. Tax collectors were notorious thieves and were usually wealthy. They were also considered collaborators with Rome and despised for it – some accused them of treason.

Levi was in his tollbooth one day, enduring insults and making money. Jesus passed by and noticed Levi, stopped and said, “Follow me.” No introduction, no explanation, no sales pitch or soul-stirring sermon, just a summons, “Follow me.”

Levi heard Jesus' call for what it was, a magisterial summons from a Lord. He got up and followed Jesus. The consequences of his new allegiance were profound. His life was transformed by the experience and, if tradition is to be believed, he wrote the Gospel we call Matthew – and the world's never been quite the same.

As Bonhoeffer retells the old story, he notes that we moderns have a difficult time taking the story at face value. We want some explanatory details. Surely some deep psychological need, some profound dissatisfaction with his wealth and success, prompted Levi to leave it all to follow an itinerant preacher around Galilee. Or we suppose Levi must have known Jesus prior to his call and/or knew the content of his message and mission. Or, maybe he was a spiritual “seeker,” and Jesus was the answer to his search. In any event there’d been some prior preparatory work.

But the early church which preserved and shaped the story, and Luke who recorded it, will have none of that. They were interested in much larger things – and we should be, too. They left out whatever details might attach to the story for a reason. According to the story, there is one reason and one reason only why Levi abandoned his old life that day: Jesus Christ himself. Because Jesus called, Levi followed. Jesus’ call was the summons of a Lord. He obeyed.

Levi’s act of radical faith in Jesus was a personal and exclusive attachment to his Jesus Christ. He did not join a conventional religious worship. He didn’t sign on to a doctrinal system or creed. He didn’t give in to a convincing argument about God. He heard Jesus summon him and he attached himself and his allegiance to Jesus Christ as his Lord.

It is a story repeated times without number over the centuries since then. Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself heard Jesus’ call to discipleship, and he obeyed. He called for his church to heed that call and not hear the voice of a stranger. That call shook the German Church to its core and a resistance movement to the Nazi’s siren call was formed. It professed, “Jesus Christ is Lord, and we will not heed the voice of a pretender.”

In fact, in his book Bonhoeffer writes, “When Jesus calls a man he bids him come and die. He meant that figuratively – discipleship means giving our entire life to God revealed in Jesus Christ – but for Bonhoeffer, that call to death became literal. He was executed in the service of his Lord and in resistance to an alien Lord.

Christianity, at its very heart, is a personal relationship. We place ourselves and our lives in the hands of God as God is revealed in Jesus Christ. Faith means attaching ourselves to Jesus as our master, teacher and Lord. We give ourselves to him and his service. We entrust our lives to him and his cause on earth. And we hear his voice; “Love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind.” We confess that we know God because Jesus reveals God and leads us to God.

Being a member of a church does not make us a Christian any more than wearing a wedding ring makes us married. Marriage is the solemn, lifelong commitment to love another no matter what. The ring is a sign we’ve made that covenant commitment. (For what it’s worth, from a biblical perspective, marriage is about that covenant commitment, not the legal or ceremonial details attached to our love for another.)

Covenant commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord is what binds the church together and makes it possible to live with lots of personal and religious ambiguity. We may differ about politics, theology, church governance; we will certainly differ on the details of social and church life and come at things from opposite points of view, but at the center our common allegiance to Jesus Christ creates a covenantal community capable of living in peace, love and hope.

That call reaches across the Christian church to bind all its diverse wings together. From the Billy Graham wing of the church with its altar calls and personal piety to the so-called liberal wing of the church that features social action, the church is bound together by commitment to Jesus Christ.

Albert Schweitzer was one of the remarkable Christian figures of the last century and a voice for the left wing of the church. Trained as a musician, Schweitzer was an expert on J.S. Bach and held a Ph.D. in music. He studied theology and earned another Ph.D.

Finally, he heard Jesus' call in a new way, earned an M.D., and spent the rest of his life as a missionary in Africa.

His great scholarly achievement was his study of the historical quest for the historical Jesus. After hundreds of pages of analysis of the many scholarly attempts to "explain" Jesus, he concluded his book with these words – and mind you, Schweitzer was what we would call a "liberal" Christian –

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side; He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: *'Follow thou me!'* and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

But the text is not finished with us yet. According to Luke, the first thing Levi did after his commitment to Christ was, oddly enough, to throw a party – "a great banquet" is what Luke calls it. He'd experienced something quite radical: the personal power and presence of his Lord. He knew his call to follow was no credit to him. Beyond his sin, corruption and betrayal of his neighbors, Jesus had extended to him, of all people, an invitation to participate as honored guest in God's great banquet. That, Levi thought, demands a party, and he invited all his tax collector friends to come meet Jesus and share the same experience.

That presented a large problem. If Jesus speaks for God, most folks thought, then he should know better than to hang out with collaborators and traitors, sinners all. Influential religious voices of the time urged their followers to refrain from association with anything less than holy, especially people who were tainted by sin. Most people thought collaborators with Rome were worse than sinners. They were traitors and should be shunned.

Some scrupulous religious folks observed Jesus consorting with this motley assemblage and began to criticize him. Jesus responded, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32).

He hung out with Levi and people like him because they needed God more than anyone else. It was a radical move that reflects the radical grace of God given without reference to the qualifications or merit of any of us.

But, note also, Jesus' offer of radical grace doesn't let Levi – or anyone else – off the moral hook. "I came to call sinners to repentance," Jesus said. Radical grace has radical consequences, namely a moral and ethical life. Or, as Bonhoeffer put it, "the grace of God is not cheap grace. It cost God everything, and it costs us our lives."

C.S. Lewis puts most things quite well. He writes, "Christianity tells people to repent and promises them forgiveness. It has nothing to say to people who do not know they have anything to repent of and who do not feel they need any forgiveness." Forgiveness and repentance demand obedience to the Lord who forgives.

To those who have heard Jesus' magisterial call, "Follow me," comes his equally powerful demand, "If you love me, do what I say."

Grace is free, but it is not cheap or easy. The call to discipleship demands that we who freely receive grace freely give it away. In a Balkanized world in which we are urged to reject, even despise those who disagree with us about politics or religion, comes the call "Love your neighbor as yourself. Love your enemies. Pray for them. Serve them." Or, to put it another way, "Throw them a party!"

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Professor Harvey Cox recently retired from a lifetime of teaching and scholarship at Harvard Divinity School. Dr. Cox was a leader in the liberal Protestant/mainline Christianity. Back in the '60s, he was accused of being a radical theologian akin to the God-is-Dead theologians. You would think he was as far from Billy Graham as you could imagine.

Graham and my distinguished predecessor at Park Street Church, Harold Ockenga, were the prime movers in the institutional merger that created Gordon-Conwell Seminary in Boston. Graham served on the seminary board for many years.

On the occasion of one of the anniversaries of the merger, a great banquet was held in Boston with Mr. Graham as the honored guest. It was a grand affair with many of the big names in Evangelical Christianity present.

Because I was minister at Park Street, which has a longtime relationship with Graham and Gordon-Conwell, Gloria and I were guests that night. As I watched that interesting scene develop, I noticed Harvey Cox making his way through the throng toward Billy Graham. He knelt beside Mr. Graham's chair and the two of them commenced a long engaged conversation. Then Dr. Cox went through the tables meeting and greeting people. This, I thought, is very interesting. I know Harvey well enough that I went to him and said, "What in the world are you doing in this strange Evangelical setting?" Harvey laughed and said, "I want to honor Billy Graham" – they knew each other from the times Graham spoke at Harvard – "and I want to honor the Evangelicals who honor him." And, he chuckled, "I might learn something."

At the end of the day, the call and the demand seem clear: Trust Christ. Make him Lord. Throw a party to celebrate. Invite your friends, even your enemies. Who knows, we might learn something!

Amen.

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