

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
November 8, 2009
Mark 3:13-19
“A Cast of Characters”

Imagine yourself in a big crowd, surrounded by people you don't know, but with a few friends around. Suddenly you hear your name being called, perhaps over a PA-system. Now do a gut check: Does this scenario make you feel good or nervous? Is being called out from a crowd a positive or a negative thing? Well, you're likely saying, "It depends on why I'm being called out. If I'm the next contestant on 'The Price is Right,' that's a good thing. If I'm being paged at the airport or in a hospital waiting room, I'd probably be feeling anxious and worried."

Human beings are complicated creatures. We love to receive compliments that set us apart from others. Yet we also love to blend in, to just be part of the crowd and not put on the spot and embarrassed. In today's gospel lesson, Mark described a situation in which Jesus was surrounded on a beach by a huge crowd – a mixed audience of Jews and Gentiles, packed around him in such large numbers that Jesus had to tell his disciples to keep a small boat nearby so he wouldn't be crushed by the crowd.

Then Jesus separated himself from the crowd and went up a mountain. In doing so, he called several people by name. Many of these names are familiar to you: Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John, Matthew the tax collector, Simon the Zealot¹, Judas Iscariot. When I first thought about today's sermon, I anticipated reflecting on these twelve apostles, this unlikely cast of characters Jesus called to be with him. There were challenging dynamics present in this group: tension between the city dwellers and the less-educated fishermen, or between Matthew, the Jew collecting taxes for the hated Roman oppressors and Simon, the Zealot committed to chasing out the Romans and punishing anyone who might be supporting them. This cast of characters offers some fascinating stories, just as each of you are part of this church's cast of characters with your own faith testimonies to share. But the more I read this passage, my attention moved from the list of twelve names to the sequence of several verbs describing what Jesus did that day. And I kept imagining what the apostles felt when they heard their names called, when they were called out from the crowd.

Put yourself in their place. Imagine you are in this crowd and Jesus calls Simon Peter, Andrew, Matthew, and then says your name. We're told that Jesus called these people for two reasons: so they would be with him and that they would be sent out to preach and to have authority over evil. Those seem like contradictory goals: to be with Jesus and to be sent out into the world. However, the order of these verbs is what is most important. In John's gospel, Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

¹ Mark's gospel calls Simon "the Cananaean" while other gospels refer to him as Simon the Zealot. "Cananaean" does not refer to Cana or Canaan, but is a transliteration of an Aramaic word "qanna", which means "jealous" or "zealous" one.

(Jn 15:5) Jesus calls us to come to him, to abide with him, to acknowledge that from him comes life and strength and healing as we go out to live and work in this world. Now, the disciples that day did not submit résumés and apply for the position of apostle. They did not step forward with the typical American virtue of self-promotion and ask to be hired by Jesus. No, they were called, summoned forth, drafted into discipleship by the One who knew their potential, loved them unconditionally, and would demand much of them. The same is true of us. We pick and choose many things in our lives. We choose banks, grocery stores, doctors and hairdressers. We choose jobs, partners and pets. Too often we choose churches the same way – based on convenience and personal comfort. But in truth, we never simply volunteer for Christian duty; we are called to leave everything and start anew by following Christ.

While standing in a crowd and then hearing our name called, we are compelled to respond. We must step away from anonymity and step toward someone having authority over us. Today consider this question: Jesus has called you. If he has taken the initiative in your life, where is it? How can someone else notice that you've been called? Being here in church this morning is part of the answer, but believe me, it's not the whole answer. Not by a long shot.

I was just at the Covenant Network conference in exotic Cleveland. Covenant Network is a group working for full participation of gay and lesbian Christians in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). One of the conference speakers was Kenda Dean, Associate Professor of Youth, Church and Culture at Princeton Seminary. She spoke about what it means to be sent out today. In effect, we are all missionaries, but our mission work has less to do with geography (like going off to Africa or South America) and more to do with the culture around us. She sees this calling particularly important in relation to our young people, who are not out there rebelling against the church because frankly for many of them, the church isn't significant enough to be worth rebelling against. The church is a nice place, but it is something either optional or irrelevant or both in their lives. Where did they get this ecclesiology? From their parents, who largely believe the same thing.

Professor Dean stressed that the faith of contemporary culture can best be described as "moral therapeutic deism." It teaches us to do good – to be moral; it teaches that the goal of life is to be happy – hence therapeutic faith; and it teaches that God is not involved in our life unless we need God to answer an urgent prayer for us, like some sort of Cosmic Butler – hence a vague, deism religion. Recent research emphasizes how young people and their parents alike are willing to talk about God, but they are uncomfortable talking about Jesus. He is much too particular for today's bland, spiritual perspective.

Yet Jesus is at the heart of living faith. Jesus sees us and then calls us out from the crowd to become his disciple. This is a literal act. It means we are to step away from old things and step toward new things in Christ. Martin Luther King, Jr. had an interesting illustration of this point from his famous sermon "The Drum Major Instinct." I'd like us to listen to his words now. (Play audio clip)

*Note to web readers: Here is the excerpt of Dr. King's sermon:
The other day I was saying, I always try to do a little converting when I'm in jail. And when we were in jail in Birmingham the other day, the white wardens and all enjoyed coming around the cell to talk about the race problem. And they were showing us where we were so wrong demonstrating. And they were showing us where segregation was so right. And they were showing us where intermarriage was so wrong. So I would get to preaching, and we would get to talking—calmly, because they wanted to talk about it. And then we got down one day to the point—that was the second or third day—to talk about where they lived, and how much they were earning. And when those brothers told me what they were earning, I said, "Now, you know what? You ought to be marching with us. [laughter] You're just as poor as Negroes." And I said, "You are put in the position of supporting your oppressor, because through prejudice and blindness, you fail to see that the same forces that oppress Negroes in American society oppress poor white people. (Yes) And all you are living on is the satisfaction of your skin being white, and the drum major instinct of thinking that you are somebody big because you are white. And you're so poor you can't send your children to school. You ought to be out here marching with every one of us every time we have a march."*

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http://www.civilizednation.com/speeches/mlk/The_Drum_Major_Instinct.htm

There Dr. King was, in jail, going about the business of converting others. He did it respectfully and patiently, waiting until the jailers would move beyond the usual rhetoric of racism and then begin to share their personal stories. He asked them how much they earned, and knowing how they too were struggling, he called them out. He called them to come march with him – to step away from prejudice and oppressive practices and heed a higher calling of faith, serving the Prince of Peace and the true Lord of life and justice.

As today is “Joy Sunday,” a time of celebration as we commit ourselves and our pledges to the ministry of Christ here at ELPC, I would emphasize that Jesus’ calling of the twelve apostles is a powerful stewardship message. There are lots of ways you can be a quiet participant in the life of our church. You can come to worship; you can read the newsletter; you can occasionally attend Sunday school or a church event. Sadly, for many, that fits with a self-made faith of “moral therapeutic deism.” But today is different. In a while we will bring forward food for the hungry that you have generously provided. We will bring forward commitments of pledges and tithes that you will seek to honor. There will be a holy chaos of grocery bags and processions out of the pews, young and old, new members and long-time church folk. At its heart, all of this needs to be seen as an answer to Christ’s call. It is a physical, literal, stepping forward by faith for you today, just as it was for the twelve apostles of old.

Add your name to the cast of characters called to be disciples and remember the verbs in this passage. We are called first to be with Christ, this particular Redeemer, who secondly sends us out to do two things. We are to proclaim the good news of this one who is the true Vine, the living Water, the one who suffered and died and rose again for us. And we are called out from the crowd to have authority over whatever is broken and demonic and evil in this world. We are to be the voice for change, the hands active in healing, the advocate assisting the oppressed, the witness for what is just, and the lens through which others see God in Christ by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

In Dr. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," he said this: "Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of [people] willing to be co-workers with God."² That's us – called to be co-workers with God in Christ. So step forward today, toward the One who "is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (Eph 3:20-21)

² Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail", 1964 version quoted in book Why We Can't Wait.