

“Will You Take the Call?”

Jonah 3:1-10 Mark 1:14-20

Scott B. Martin – January 25, 2009

Today we have the story of the calling of the 12 disciples. It is striking in its suddenness. As Richard Swanson puts it, “Bang he called them. Bang they left their net. ... Things happen quickly around Jesus.” It can happen like that. Jesus’ call can come like a thunderclap or it can come more slowly, like water wearing down a rock. Either way, the person who receives the call will find their life changed forever. Either way, the question arises, “When Jesus calls, will you take the call?” Either way, it means following Jesus in reaching out to others and creating a God centered community.

This sounds good doesn’t it? What could possibly be wrong with this? Who could argue with this? I suspect few of us had people discouraging us from answering our call to Christian service and community. In fact, usually it is just the opposite, our family, friends and neighbors encourage us, or at a minimum do nothing to block us.

In part, this is the result of the triumph of Christianity. We know that for almost three hundred years being a Christian was considered odd, even antipatriotic, then Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Once this took place Christianity went from being odd to being officially promoted and part of the overall culture. Christianity became the very foundation of what would become Western Civilization. While in many ways this foundation had eroded in Europe, it is still very evident here in the United States.

It is inconceivable that an outright atheist would be elected president of the United States. There was some mumbling around the edges about President Obama taking his oath of office while placing his hand on a Bible and saying “so help me God”; there would have been a greater furor had he not done these things. This represents a sign of the “triumph” of Christianity, but it may also signal possible danger. The “oddness” that often accompanies following Jesus has been pushed into the background.

We have all heard that the saying, “The truth shall set you free.” Flannery O’Connor once expressed another aspect of following the paths of truth, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd.” Those who have found Jesus to be the “way, the truth and the life” have often found this to be the case!

I can’t help but feel sorry for old Zebedee in our gospel passage. His reaction to Jesus’ calling his sons to be disciples is not recorded. Was he pleased that his sons would become followers of a Galilean itinerant rabbi? I suspect not. In fact I wouldn’t be surprised if he thought they had lost their minds!

Put yourself in his place. As a father or mother would you have said? I imagine it going something like this: “James! John! Come back here right this minute! What are you doing? How can you leave your mother and me and follow this STRANGER? Look what happened to this Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist. Herod has put him in PRISON! Do you want them to do that to you? Be reasonable. Your mother and I are getting old. It’s getting harder for me to work the boats. This business was built up by my father and his father before him and I have built it up for you and you can pass it on to your sons. It’s a good business. You’ll never starve. People need to eat. Why leave your family, your friends, a good business to follow what, a

nobody, a Galilean holy man? What is the kingdom of God compared to a secure living, a wife, children, and the respect of your neighbors? Would you give all this up? What will come of it? What will people think? What will happen to you? I'm a religious man, but this is too much! The Prophet Moses brought back the commands of God and one of them was "Honor your father and mother!" You are not doing God's will! Have you lost your minds! Come back....come back... come back.

"Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.' James, son of Zebedee and his brother John, ...were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately Jesus called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed Jesus." (Mark 1:14-15, 19-20)

We often skip over the introductory sentence and go right to the calling of the disciples, but notice how Mark begins. The calling of the disciples seems to come out of the blue, but perhaps it doesn't. Perhaps Mark is doing more than marking the time in saying, **"Now after John was arrested..."** Dr. Tom Wright observes, **"Notice how Jesus picks the moment to act. As long as John was announcing the kingdom, down by the Jordan, Jesus could bide his time. But when John is put into prison he knows it time to act. Everything we know about Jesus suggests that he would have prayed and waited upon his Father for the sense that the moment had arrived. But God speaks through situations and events as well as through the still, small voice in the heart, and God was now saying that if this kingdom-movement was to go forwards rather than backwards, it was time for Jesus to go public with his own vocation. So he came to the Galilean villages as a wandering prophet, not a stationary one like John:**

a messenger urgently needing to tell people what was going on. And his message was that God's time had come. The moment had arrived."

(Mark for Everyone, p. 9) The only question was, "Would anyone accept the call?"

It had to be encouraging to Jesus that he was able to gather 12 disciples, who would leave everything to join him in his kingdom journey. Jesus would not be alone. Yes, God was with him, but now he had human companions on the kingdom journey. Now Jesus had companions who would become his hands, his feet, his voice, his BODY, in the world. God's kingdom movement would now ripple out throughout the world and onward through time, right down to this present moment.

Almost 1,200 years after Christ there was a man named Francis Bernadone. His father was a wealthy cloth merchant in the province of Umbria Italy. It is said that he started out life living the life of a rather spoiled rich kid, dressing in finery befitting his station, enjoying a good party, associating with young men like himself.

But is said that gradually he began to change. He got rid of his fine cloths, while he still spent lavishly he also began to give to the poor, and the parties began to lose their allure. He began to pray.

One day he was riding his horse across the Umbrian plain and came upon a leper. Like most he was filled with fear and loathing when he saw the poor man. He gave his a wide birth. Then overcoming his aversion he pulled his horse up next to the man, dismounted and embraced him! He gave the man all of his gold and went on his way.

Shortly after this he went on a pilgrimage to Rome. Seeing how few coins were in the offering at the tomb of St. Peter, he immediately put all his gold in the offering. Then he saw a poor mendicant. He embraced him and

traded cloths with him and fasted with the rest of the beggars at the gate to St. Peters.

Returning to Umbria he had a vision in which he heard God say “Go Francis, repair my house, which you see is falling into ruin.” He took this to mean that one of the local churches, St. Damian, needed to be repaired. He went to the priest and offered him gold, which the priest is said to have refused, at which point Francis flung the gold at him.

When Francis’ father heard about this he was furious. What was his crazy son doing throwing gold here and there and giving gold away to lepers and to the church in such a profligate way.

The father got his gold back from the priest at St. Damian. Francis spent a month in a cave near the church. A month later, when he returned to town, he was filthy and starving. The townspeople laughed at him and pelted him with mud and stones. They thought he had gone mad.

This was all too much for Francis’ father. He beat him, bound him and locked him in his room. When his mother later let him out he found sanctuary with a sympathetic priest. His father came and dragged him before the priest to force Francis to renounce his inheritance. This Francis gladly did and in a further sign of the break between the two he took off his cloths, dropped them in a heap at his father’s feet, saying, “Hitherto I have called you my father on earth, henceforth I desire only to say ‘Our Father who art in heaven.’” Francis, embraced Lady Poverty and spent the rest of his life composing canticles of praise to the God he served and helping all who came across his path needing aid. Hundreds of others were moved to join Francis in this quest. Thousands more, since that day have joined the Franciscan order, continuing to follow this quest. Francis answered the call

and the truth indeed made him “odd”, so odd that we have declared him to be a saint of God!

God’s call comes in all shapes and forms. Sometimes it comes in ways that gently shape us and nudge us to a life not so very different than the life we have been leading. Sometimes it comes like a thunderclap, sudden and ominous, demanding our attention and calling us to a life that will make us odd. However God’s call comes to you, “Will you take the call?” Amen.