

Called

sermon

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Matthew 19:28 - 20:16

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I grew up in a church that spoke often and spoke convincingly about God's calling in our lives. Did you? Too many of us probably stopped short, equating that calling with a calling into professional Christian ministry; and a number of the youth in my church voiced a commitment to enter the ministry—or in the case of the girls, a commitment to become missionaries (or maybe preacher's wives). But as I reflect on those early years, although a calling into professional ministry was held up as the ideal, the sense that all of us were called to live out our faith in our day-to-day lives was unmistakable; and for that I am most grateful. More than a matter that stopped in its tracks as we exited the doors of the church, our Christian calling, our Christian vocation was to find expression as we stepped out into our community. It included what we did and how we lived our lives not just on Sunday, but throughout the rest of the week. Our vocation, our calling, we were taught, included our care for one another; but it also included the quality of work we did and the sort of people we were when we went to school and our individual places of work. It included a sense of responsibility that was more than just "religious." It included providing for the care and well-being of the world that surrounded us.

The word "vocation" is rooted in the Latin term *vocatio*. It signifies a "call," a "summons," an "invitation;" and it is related to such Latin-based words as "voice" and "invoke." The Greek word is *klesis*, found in the words "cleric" and "ecclesiastical" and the word we use for our newsletter, *ekklesia* or church. A common term in Greek culture, *ekklesia* signified gatherings of citizens who had been "called out" or "called together" by the State to deliberate over important decisions. Picked up by the early Christians to speak of the church, it was also informed by the experience of the church's Hebrew predecessors who were called together by God into a *qahal*, a congregation. In neither case was it an exclusive calling, issued only to a select few. It was a summons from the State for all citizens to come and shoulder their responsibilities. It was a summons from God for all of Israel to come and listen to the voice of God that they might act on it. The emphasis was less on the togetherness of the congregation than it was on the congregation's reason for being in the first place. The *ekklesia*, the assembly, the congregation was together because it had been *called* together. The congregation was together because it had been called for the specific purpose of hearing and acting in response to God's bidding.

Do we have that sense as we come together as a church? Do we have the sense of being bidden, being called by God to be here? Or do we blush a little bit at the very idea? It's true that with time the sense of vocation or calling for everyone in the church faded. With the rise of the monastic movement in the third and fourth centuries, Christian vocation came to signify those entering the religious orders. Luther and Calvin sought to recover it in the Reformation, speaking of every Christian as having a vocation—a vocation to serve God not just in the church, but wherever they found themselves in the world. With time, the reformers' call, too, became diluted; and the idea of vocation became secularized, merely signifying one's choice of career. Writing in the 1930's, Dietrich Bonhoeffer decried the narrowing of the meaning of holding a "responsible position" in life to a select few professions while the masses of laborers were dismissed as somehow unimportant. Bonhoeffer struggled with what he called "the pseudo-Lutheran view" in which the concept of vocation "simply provides the justification and sanctification of secular institutions" [*Ethics*, 254].

Does the concept of vocation, of calling not address all who respond to God's calling in Christ? And in our modern age, can we talk about being called by God without squirming, without fearing that we are somehow claiming too much for ourselves? Rest assured that on this Labor Day weekend or more accurately, as many in the church have come to speak of it, on this Labor Sunday, we are not reaching for a religiosity that claims to have a corner on God, that claims to know more about God than we can accurately claim. In our effort to "speak Christian," to reinvest the words of church with deep meaning, what does it mean to speak of our vocation, our calling as Christians in the midst of the world? What does our vocation, our calling in Christ say to us as we think about our own responsibility in the workplace and more, as we think about our responsibility with respect to the work experience and quality of life experienced by so many in our community and world?

We are called to responsibility for those who labor. Although we appropriately draw a distinction in our multi-cultural world between church and state, the responsibility to which biblical faith calls us is not just to narrow concern for “religious” matters. We are called to responsibility for our neighbor. As we read earlier in this morning’s service, poised to cross over into the land of promise, the Hebrew people were welcomed into the abundance that lay before them. Moving into a land of plenty, however, they were cautioned not to think only of themselves. “Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth’” (Dt. 8:17). Do not pat yourselves on the back, Deuteronomy is saying, and congratulate yourself on how you have pulled yourself up by your own bootstraps. Do not consider that what you have is a mark of privilege that you are somehow favored by God over your less fortunate brother. Receiving all that you have as a gift from God, your life should be marked by gratitude and by provision for those in need.

The Torah, the Law of Moses, is laden with directives for the care of the vulnerable, the widow and orphan, the foreigner, the poor in the land. And later, the prophets literally rail at their countrymen for taking advantage of the vulnerable and failing to care for those in need. “I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates,” Isaiah depicts God saying. “When you stretch out your hands [in prayer], I will hide my eyes from you; . . . your hands are full of blood” (1:13, 15).

Jesus reflects his Jewish roots when he counsels the rich young man who comes to him to sell what he has and give it to the poor. And then in response to a question from his disciples about what they might expect since they had left everything to follow him, he tells a story—a seemingly strange story, to be quite honest. A story that seems to speak of anything but equal treatment and workers’ rights.

In the fevered pitch of the harvest season, early in the morning a landowner goes to the gathering place of local day laborers and enlists workers for his field. Given the urgency of the job, he returns at four different points throughout the day to hire more workers. He makes his last trip for workers at 5 p.m., only one hour before the end of the work day. And then he summons all of the workers to receive their pay. He pays the last hired first, right in front of everyone; and much to the distress of those who came early in the morning, he pays everyone the same. The story ends as it also began with the saying, repeated apparently for emphasis, lest we miss it: “The last will be first, and the first last” (Mt. 19:30; 20:16).

Writing in the environs of the first century church where early Christians wrestled with who had priority in the new day of God’s reign, Matthew’s warning was significant then; and it is significant now. The dispute over the preferability of those with Jewish roots over the Johnny-come-lately gentiles waxed hot and long. In the context of God’s new day, Jesus’ parable moves to say, the focus is not on who gets here first, who is the most deserving, who is the person of privilege. The focus is on the God of abundant grace, who has more than enough to share. “I am bringing you into a land of plenty,” God said to the Israelites. “You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD you God.” “Out of my plenty, I choose to give the last the same as I give you,” the landowner says to the irritated worker. “Are you envious because I am generous?”

God’s grace lavishly responds and calls us to respond to need. In the 1990’s Larry and I were involved in forming a new group of Baptists, who were seeking to be both faithful and free. During a council meeting, two agencies of the group became involved in something of a tug-of-war, one suspicious that the other might be receiving too much of the financial pie. Joe Hairston, a distinguished African American, some years retired from the bench, sat there with his usual demeanor, eyes closed and seemingly dozing. But then he spoke, making us all aware that as usual he had not missed a syllable of what was taking place. “As parents of two small daughters,” he told us, “we did not treat our children the same. On some days, one needed shoes; and we bought her shoes, but not the other one. On another day, one needed to see a dentist; and we took her to the dentist without the other. We loved them both the same, but we did not treat them the same. We responded to their need.”

God, Jesus is saying, responds to the needs of God’s children; and when one of God’s children is in need, God responds and calls us to respond. On this Labor Sunday, we gather in full awareness

that many of God's children are hurting. Some in our own community and nation have been unemployed far too long, and as happens in such a situation, they hurt economically and they hurt emotionally. They question their value as men and women, mothers and fathers as they find themselves challenged to provide for themselves and their families.

Others among us have jobs and work faithfully every day. Yet for those who work in four-fifths of the jobs in our country classified as "non-professional" and "non-supervisory," wages and salaries have stagnated since the mid-1970's. As a result, average income for the bottom 90 percent of households today is lower, adjusted for inflation, than in 1970 ["Labor Sunday 2012: A Fair Balance," ucc worship resources].

Some among us, whom we may not even see, toil long, hard, difficult days in the fields. They pick vegetables and fruit that show up on our tables; but their pay is so inadequate, they cannot afford such delicacies for their own tables. As agricultural workers, they work unprotected in many respects from the laws that safeguard other workers. Most of them are foreign-born; an estimated 70 to 80 percent of them are undocumented. They work for abysmally low wages; they become ill due to exposure to hazardous pesticides; they live in dangerously substandard housing or no housing at all [Edith Rasell, "Getting Our Work Done"].

Around the world, inequality within nations and between nations is growing. Between the mid-1980's and today, among the 73 nations for which data are available, 53 countries, home to over 80 percent of the world's population, saw a widening gap between the wealthy and the poor and middle class. Only 9 countries saw a shrinking of that gap.

No one could blame us if we turned our heads. Many do. However, on this Labor Sunday, I would say to you that we are called to model our compassion on the compassion of God. We are called, yes—called, to invest our lives in closing the gaps and meeting the needs of those who are last and least of those whom God loves. No excuses, no mere lamenting and wringing our hands or pointing the finger of blame will do. We are called. And we should act like it.