

When is a Call not a Call?

A sermon on Mark 1:29-39; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; & Isaiah 40:21-31 by Nathan Nettleton, 4 February 2024

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Message

Following Jesus in ministering among the needs around us is not a call to do everything ourselves.

Sermon

Do you ever get exhausted trying to keep up with all your responsibilities and all the demands on your time? Sometimes just keeping up with the unavoidable basics is bad enough, but do you ever then find yourself feeling inadequate and perhaps even a bit guilty about all the issues and serious needs in the world that you are not responding to?

There are so many appeals to give money or time to this or that crisis or to this campaign or that relief project. Even in our own neighbourhoods, there are soup kitchens and homeless shelters and elderly shut-ins who need visiting and disabled kids programs that need running. The list is endless. Do you ever feel like you are falling way short of what God might be calling you to do in all this?

And to change tack slightly, do you ever get exhausted when you read or hear the writings of the Apostle Paul? I mean, I know that the guy was an advocate of Christian ministers remaining single so that they would be free of family responsibilities and could put all their energy into ministry and prayer, but sometimes I wonder whether he wasn't also just a manic workaholic.

Today's extract from his writings was a case in point. Not only does he speak of his prophetic and evangelistic work as something he is obliged to do because Christ has called him to it, but he says he seeks to be all things to all people in order to be more effective; a description so memorable it has become a cliché.

Now however exhausting it might sound, what he is saying here is important to hear, because it is a significant commentary on the nature of the gospel. He is talking about how infinitely translatable it is, and therefore how flexible we can be in the way we live it out among different groups of people.

The history of Christian missions is littered with tragic stories of situations in which the missionary organisations couldn't distinguish between the gospel and the cultural trappings of their own societies and so set out to westernise as much as Christianise the peoples to whom they ministered. But Paul is saying that that is not necessary. When you are among Jews, you can live as the Jews live. When you are among Corinthians, you can live as the Corinthians live. When you are among Gothic Punks you can live as the Gothic Punks live. They don't have to change those identities in order to follow Jesus.

Now if we were to question him on it, I'm sure Paul would affirm that there are some necessary ethical limits to this identification with another culture, and he hints at this when he speaks of still being under the law of Christ. When you are among cannibals you can't eat as the cannibals do, and when you among neo-nazis, you can't hate and harass like they do.

But here, his point is following on from what we heard last week which was talking about the willingness to give up freedoms in order to identify with another group of people. Last week he was saying that to assert your moral freedom when others are feeling more morally timid is unloving and destructive, and so those who are morally free to eat non-kosher food should consider sticking to kosher food when they are with people who feel that eating non-kosher food is an immoral act. Voluntarily curtail your own freedom to maintain fellowship with others.

And so here, Paul is simply illustrating that further with regard to his own ministry. He voluntarily gives up whatever freedoms he needs to give up in order to identify himself with those to whom he is going with the message of the gospel, for if he were to assert his freedoms, he would offend the sensibilities of his hearers and lose his chance to win a hearing from them.

As he makes clearer elsewhere, this pattern is the pattern of Jesus, who voluntarily relinquished many of his freedoms as God in order to become one with us and communicate the gracious justice and mercy of God to us. Jesus makes an enormous self-sacrifice in order to share the love of God with us; we follow his pattern and make self-sacrifices in order to continue the sharing of it to others.

Now that is all good theology and admirable social theory, but it still leaves me feeling like I need a good long lie down. Anybody who is seriously involved in cross-cultural ministry will tell you that immersing yourself in another culture is an enormous challenge. Learning a new language is hard enough, but learning a new cultural language is often more of a challenge because we are less conscious of our cultural languages.

So to use Paul's first example, just trying to live like a Jew among the Jews would be quite a challenge to us, because it takes serious study and serious humility to learn the culture and how to live it. How many of you know how to live like a normal Jew on the Sabbath, let alone on Rosh Hashannah or Yom Kippur? And we share the same scriptures as them, so how much more trouble would you have fitting in with Muslims from Afghanistan?

Someone once sent me a photo of a sign which was allegedly outside a Baptist Church that read, "We wanted to be Eastern Orthodox, but we couldn't figure out the calendar!" So if even identifying with one unfamiliar culture is a major challenge, what on earth would it take to be all things to all people? Surely God can't be asking that much of us? I don't know about you, but just thinking about it and I'm ready for that lie down again!

I think Jesus might have run into a similar wall early in his ministry in the story we heard tonight from the gospel according to Mark. The story picked up where we left off last week with Jesus having just run into serious demonic opposition while teaching in the synagogue. He freed the man from the demonic torment, and when we pick up this week he and his disciples are leaving the synagogue and going to the house of Simon and Andrew.

Now in Mark's gospel going into a house, especially a disciple's house, is code for going into the church. Things that Jesus says in houses are said to the Christians. Things that are said outside houses are said to the rest of the world. So when we leave the synagogue with its demons, and enter the house and are immediately confronted with Simon's sick mother-in-law, we are being alerted to the fact that things are not altogether healthy inside the church

either. Even Jesus can't hide in the church to get away from the overwhelming neediness of the world. The neediness is just as present there.

And after he heals the mother-in-law, the word gets out and the whole town is on the doorstep with their needs, all looking for a piece of him. Is it any surprise that the next morning Jesus has done a runner and is hiding out in the bush where he can pray and catch his breath?

Well, actually, it is a surprise to his disciples. They think he's on a roll and he should run with it. They've left everything to follow Jesus, believing and hoping that he might be the Messiah who would unite the people and overthrow their oppressors, and here he is in the first week with the crowds already flocking to him. They've backed the right horse. Instant fame! Everybody wants to be in on the action. It's all happening!

And what does Jesus do? He pulls out. When they find him they say, "Jesus, what are you doing? Everyone is searching for you. We've got appointments booked back to back for you for the rest of the week!" But Jesus replies, "No, let's get out of here and go somewhere else where we are not so well known." If you want to know why Judas Iscariot eventually gave up on Jesus and turned him over to his enemies, you could probably start right here at the beginning. The disciples had big ambitions for Jesus, and he wasn't going along with them.

So what are we to make of Jesus's actions here? How can he turn his back on all those needy people who are seeking his help and just walk out of town? Sure, *we* might be able to understand running out of steam under that sort of mass crowd response, but this is Jesus. Isn't he supposed to be our role model for sacrificial self-giving? What ever happened to being all things to all people? He's out in the bush being nothing to nobody!

I think this connects with another one of those strange things Jesus said on another occasion. "The poor you will always have with you." I think he put into words that time something he is demonstrating by his actions this time: the needs will always be far greater than our capacities to respond sufficiently to them. And just as he was, on that occasion, saying that it can be okay to put some money into something that seems a little indulgent, so too he is saying by his actions this time, that sometimes it is right to walk away from a pressing need and say, "I know it is real, and I know it matters, but I'm not the one who is called to deal with it at this time."

We've been thinking a lot about vocation here lately. A number of individuals are asking personal vocation questions, either because they are still early in their careers and working out what is right for them, or because aging and retirement have arrived, and they are asking what their contribution to the world is to be now.

And as a community, our move to being a congregation whose worship life is conducted online, is raising significant questions about our vocation as a congregation. If we are no longer embedded in any particular neighbourhood, what does mission look like? Who are we reaching out to? And what should be done to ensure that the valuable bit of real estate that we are no longer using is put to a use that makes a positive difference in the world? What is God calling us to do?

One of the big traps for Christians in dealing with vocation questions is to get carried away with ideas like being all things to all people. The minute we recognise a genuine need, we feel

that we must be God's hands and feet to respond to that need. And while it is true that someone will have to be God's hands and feet if there is going to be a response, that person is the person who God calls to the task; not necessarily the first well-meaning person who notices that it needs to be done.

For us, the most important questions are not who could we be reaching out to and how could the property be used, but what is God calling us to do. If we just spot an important need and jump at it, we'll stuff it up and burn ourselves out in no time at all. But if we have the patience and the humility to recognise that God is not depending on us for the entire ministry of the gospel, and wait on God to reveal to us what our call is, then we might be able to address this with wisdom and grace.

Our other reading from Isaiah pointed out that even the young and strong can fall exhausted by the wayside, but that those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength and rise up as freely and effortlessly as eagles. We need to be sure that we don't try to pass off apathy and inertia as waiting on the Lord, but we also need to have the humility to go bush rather than just mindlessly swing into action without having prayerfully discerned God's call.

In a few minutes we will be gathered round the Lord's table being fed by the risen Christ so that we might be nourished and sustained for the journey of discipleship. And then, as we conclude, we will be praying that covenant prayer that acknowledges that God is calling us to follow Jesus and serve others, whatever that might look like.

Let's continue to use this time prayerfully, week by week, to be attentive to what specifics God might be putting into our minds as we pray that general prayer. What is the journey for which God is nourishing and sustaining us? What is the call which emerges when we wait upon God, the call that will not weigh us down with exhaustion, but renew our strength, enflame our passions, and lift us gently into the air that we might soar like eagles?