

“Survey Said: Obeying Christ’s Call”

James 3:1; Mark 8:27-38

I don’t know about you, but I am always a bit uneasy around people who make extensive use of the first person singular pronoun... **“I.”** Particularly as one who is given the opportunity... **responsibility**... to speak at some *length* (I know George, not TOO much ‘length’) in front of groups of people each week, I am very sensitive to the extent to which ‘preachers’ (I much prefer ‘Messengers’) put *themselves* in the midst of any Biblical narrative. That in proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it’s all about ‘His-story’... not ‘MY story.’ And so, when one of the suggested topics was about my personal “Call Story”... to describe just what led me to leave my ‘REAL’ Job (well, actually, they said ‘regular’ job), go back to school, and become a minister of the Gospel... I was a little hesitant. Because, as one of my favorite lines says from a message by **Craig Barnes**, current President at Princeton Seminary, *“It’s NOT ABOUT ME!”*

This being said, I also am quite aware that to make what we can learn from Scripture more **personal**, more **applicable** to our real, everyday lives, it CAN be helpful to lift up the real, everyday experiences of the one ‘proclaiming’ said Scriptures. One of the aspects of Jesus’ ministry that made it so effective is that He was not only fully God, but fully human. ***“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tested in every way, just as we are...”*** (Heb. 4:15) He laughed, he cried, he suffered loss, he celebrated triumphs... he served as a flesh-and-blood example of how we are to live a life that honors an all-powerful, and all-loving God. And to do so, we need ALL the help we can get...

And so, just as we can learn from the experiences of our Lord Jesus, perhaps some of my journey as a Christ-follower might be of some benefit to you in YOUR journey. So for the next few minutes, I’ll give you some insights into what it has meant to me... and my family... to be **“Obeying Christ’s Call.”**

As most of you are aware... perhaps *painfully* so... I grew up in B.R. And while baptized as an infant at 1st Presbyterian, did not attend there regularly until H.S., when a classmate invited me to join him at church. That aside from God's providence, the reason I stand here before you today is because someone uttered one simple question: *"Would you like to come with me to church?"* If there is a book 'Evangelism for Dummies,' this would be one of its foundational statements. When was the last time YOU used this simple evangelical 'tool?'

Anyway, I became very involved in the life of the church, particularly through MUSIC. (I know... SHOCKER, right?) I would become the youngest person elected as an Elder in that church's long history. Much more importantly, it was at FPC that I would meet my future wife, Barrie. We courted there, got married there, baptized and raised our 3 children there. Made lifetime friends there. It was the relationships I made there... both human and Divine... that impressed on me forever the importance of the church as **FAMILY**. It is that place that is called to live up to the example of Scripture... where *"there are friends who stick closer than brothers (or sisters). (Prov. 18:24)"*

As the years went by, I would have different people in the church, including some pastors, to encourage me to consider going to seminary. Particularly in the positive feedback I'd get after doing the **children's message**. (Over the years, I have come to the conclusion that adults pay better attention to the children's time than they do the sermon... maybe because they're more relaxed. The 'preacher' is not talking to them. Or maybe just 'cause it's easier to understand... 😊)

Regardless, to those encouragers I would thank them, but that I didn't need to go to seminary to make an impact for Christ. I could serve Him just as well as a layperson as a minister of the Word and Sacrament. Which is certainly true. That's why I so firmly support our reformed principle of **"the priesthood of ALL believers."** That each of one you, in your own way, is a 'priest.' An 'intercessor' between God and other members of God's creation. We are all, to borrow from an expression of my Dad's, 'graduates of the school... the *seminary*... of hard knocks.' And we all must continue in our 'postgraduate studies'...

My 'seminal' moment in going to a true 'seminary' came in 1996. I was working for a home health care supplier in BR, and one fateful Friday was unceremoniously 'downsized.'

(Isn't that what you do to a pair of *pants*?) A more kind term for, 'You're fired!' Anyway, that weekend I happened to be going to a Men's Conference in N.O. called "Promise Keepers." So I came home, grabbed my bags, kissed Barrie goodbye, and said "I love you. Oh, and btw, I got fired today." And headed out the door. STILL had a lot to learn about 'tact and diplomacy'...

When I came back home the next evening, I found Barrie in a virtually dark house, staring at the TV. I concluded that she either had a few drinks, or a few deep thoughts. Fortunately, it was the latter. She observed that perhaps this was God's message to act on something I had apparently been speaking of with increasing frequency: 'chucking' it all in our current world and going to seminary. To which I replied, 'I HAVE??' Her observations reminded me that it often takes OTHERS to see things in us that we ourselves can be blind to. Things that are good... and NOT so good! And that if we truly care about others, we need to point those things out. The results can be *life-changing.*

Ours sure were. After validating this crazy notion with family, friends, and church leaders, we decided on taking our two girls (Chandler was in college at SELU) to Columbia Seminary. A time that I think that we both agree was the best 3 consecutive years of our lives! We grew together as a family. We grew in our spiritual walk with the Lord, being stretched in very good ways. We experienced the richness of all that ATL had to offer. And made friends that will last not only an earthly lifetime, but an eternal one. And let me add that one of the reasons we can look back at those three years with such fondness is that we left seminary **debt-free.** Not only because of financial aid through Columbia, but by the generous support of our home church... many of whom make a 3-year financial pledge to support the Willis family. The people of 1st Pres. BR will always be our FAMILY... **'friends who stick closer than a brother or sister.'** And the rest, as they say, is history...

So what does OUR 'history' have to do with 'HIS-story'... and YOUR story? Well, first of all, in order to be the kind of disciples that God calls us to be... ordained or not... we must be **READY.** Consider the interaction between Jesus and His followers in the first part of today's passage from Mark. He first asks them who the 'man-out-on-the-street' thinks he is. But next, more importantly, who THEY think He is. To which Peter... the 'Moderator of Session?'... rightly says **'the Messiah'**. The Christ, the Promised Savior, God's Anointed One. To which Jesus

replies, 'Good call! We have a winner! Go get 'em, champ!' RIGHT? NOT! The Scriptures say that **"He sternly ordered them not to tell ANYONE about him."** (Mark 8:30)

Don't you find it just a LITTLE bit puzzling that with this powerful revelatory moment, in which Peter has this great epiphany of the true identity of Christ, Jesus was so 'excited' that he told His disciples to 'WAIT... don't tell ANYBODY!'

Keep this info to yourselves!' WHY?

Because they weren't READY. They still needed to be instructed by Jesus on who to effectively minister in His name. Just as I needed to receive instruction, and 'training in righteousness' in order to be prepared to 'effectively minister in Jesus' name.' And I STILL often feel like I need more 'training.' Heck, I hope I am ALWAYS learning. How about YOU? What are you, fellow 'priests,' doing to be trained' to be a more effective minister for Christ? How are you growing in God's Word? How much time do you spend as 'iron sharpening iron?' How are your 'conversation skills'... with God? (PRAYER) In fulfillment of your 'job responsibilities' as a follower of Christ, how does your 'resume' look?

Just as important as our 'readiness' to serve, however, is our **RESPONSE**. We can KNOW all about Jesus... but what are we going to DO about Jesus? Since it 'Tis the Season' ... of football... I would lift up an appropriate analogy: The team can enthusiastically gather to hear the play called in our 'holy huddle'... but once we break that huddle, we have to go out and execute the play. Even though we know it will involve taking a hit... or several. Sometimes we will be successful. Sometimes not. But we yet must STILL **'press on toward the goal to win the prize...'**

Has this life of ministry been perfect? All 'peaches and cream' ... or perhaps, 'covered dish dinners' and 'spiritual highs?' NO. Jesus doesn't promise a 'rose garden.' The **thorns** maybe... To be a follower of Christ will involve suffering, sacrifice, struggles. As Jesus said, **"If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."**(Mark 8:34) We can't carry the cross of JESUS... only HE could do that... but we WILL have to carry our own crosses. Our own **burdens**, our own **failures**, our own **challenges**. There will be those things in our life that we will have to give up, to let go of. But we rest assured in the confidence of Jesus' words: **"those who give up their life for my sake, and the sake of the**

gospel, will save it.” (Mark 8:35) What we GIVE in service to God is very small in comparison to what we RECEIVE in return. We simply must ‘answer the call’. We simply must **RESPOND**...

As you all know, this past Tuesday was Sept. 11th. Known simply as **9/11**. It was the 17th anniversary of that horrific day **17 years ago** on which over 3000 of our fellow citizens lost their lives in cowardly acts of terrorism. One of the stories I saw that day featured a current NYC firefighter named **Tim Sullivan**, who was one of the many **first responders** (well, he actually referred to himself as a ‘second responder’... because he wasn’t on the first wave of emergency personnel, he didn’t like to be referred to as a ‘FIRST responder’) who answered the call that fateful day. Five years later, he met a young Marine by the name of ****Travis Manion**, who came by the firehouse at which Sullivan stationed. It was a unit known as “Rescue 1”, which lost almost HALF of its entire company in the North Tower of the WTC. Manion and another Marine had come by simply to thank Sullivan and his fellow firefighters for their selfless service. Sullivan, an ‘ex-Marine’ himself, really hit it off with Manion, and gave him a cap from the company... one that read on the back, ***“Never Forget 9-11.”***

Manion went back to his home in PA, from where he was deployed to Iraq... His **SECOND** tour. Before he left, he told his Dad to hold on to his special prize, that he would get it when he returned. He instructed his Dad to wear that hat, and remember that it was such **sacrifice** by those first responders that he, in turn, was risking HIS life for. A family member questioned **WHY** he was going back. His response was that if he didn’t, they would send someone **less prepared** for the battlefield. He summed it up in a five-word statement: ***“If not ME, then WHO?”***

Manion never got to reclaim his prized “Rescue 1” cap from his Dad. He died while serving on his own ‘rescue mission’: shielding wounded fellow Marines from the sniper that injured them, and wound up taking his life. But his legacy lives on with a foundation that honors both veterans and those who made the ultimate sacrifice... on the battlefield, or in a city skyscraper.

My friends, may their example be one for us to remember. In considering the sacrifice of a Marine who died while shielding his fellow warrior from death, let us **'never forget'** our Lord Jesus' sacrifice, who also died to shield US from death... His fellow 'warriors' of the faith. Jesus, who put himself ahead of those **less prepared, not ready** to fight the battle. It is Him who helps us to 'run the race' before us with confidence... it is Him who takes great joy in how we **'respond'** to God's call on our lives. As members of the 'priesthood of ALL believers,' may we take seriously God's charge to us... put so well by Lt. Travis Manion... **"If not me... then who?"**

CHARGE

On the episode of *America's Got Talent* that aired this past Tuesday... Sept. 11th ... one of the contestants was the "Angel City Chorale." They are a 160-member choir with a beautifully diverse collection of singers, whose broad composition of male/female, young/old, black/white/Hispanic/Asian was representative of what we might imagine our eternal 'Angel City Choir' to look like. They sang a powerful arrangement of "*The Rising*," a song I was not familiar with. Turns out it was written by Bruce Springsteen after the tragedy of **9/11**. I would like to share with you some of its lyrics:

Left the house this morning Bells ringing filled the air
I was wearin' the cross of my calling
Make my way through this darkness
I can't feel nothing but **this chain that binds me**
Lost track of how far I've gone
How far I've gone, how high I've climbed
On my back's a sixty pound stone
On my shoulder a half mile of line

Come on up for the rising
Come on up, **lay your hands in mine**

"The Boss" was talking about those heroic firefighters... but they could also relate to our Lord Jesus. And us. We too **'wear the cross of our calling.'** We too **'make our way through this darkness'**... bound together That no matter **'how far we've gone, how high we've climbed'**, Jesus calls out to us, **"Come on up for the rising...Come on up, lay your hands in mine."** AS YOU AND I SEEK TO OBEY CHRIST'S CALL ON OUR LIVES, LET US LISTEN FOR THAT SOFT STILL VOICE OF JESUS, SAYING "COME ON UP... LAY YOUR HANDS IN MINE.'