

To Be with Him

Mark 3:7-19 (ESV)

August 25, 2002

Jesus “called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him.” There is the whole reality of the church of Jesus Christ. Jesus “called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him.” It was true then, and it is true now. This is who we are: Jesus called, and we came.

It is interesting that a great crowd followed Jesus even though the Pharisees and Herodians plotted to kill him. But the crowd did not realize who Jesus was. The unclean spirits knew who he was, and they trembled before him. This shows us that knowing Jesus is not enough by itself, for saving faith was not granted to the unclean spirits. A great crowd followed Jesus, and he healed their sick, but finally he pulled away from the crowd, retreated to the mountain top, and handpicked those whom he wanted to go with him. Jesus “called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him.” So we are here today.

This independence of Jesus from the crowd means that Jesus is in command. Jesus chooses whomever he wants to be his disciple, and his choosing them makes them his disciples. This independence of Jesus from the crowd is also indicative of the freedom of God. God is not bound to us. God is not limited by our likes or our dislikes, our intelligence or our ignorance, our supposed good or our real evil. Instead, God takes the initiative in Jesus Christ to call whomever he wants to be with him. That may sound strange to us, but it is for our good. It sounds strange to us because we are accustomed to the privilege of living in a land free choice, but that does not apply here. In the matters of approaching and serving God, there are no volunteers. Instead, we are all running the opposite direction as hard as we can.

Why do we do this? It is a part of the human condition. Once we have fallen away from a right relationship with God, we want everything in the world except to get back to God. We freely choose everything else except what we need, to return to God. Our lives are distorted, malformed by self-centeredness. In “The Last of the Mohicans,” one tragic character is a Huron Indian who suffered unspeakable loss when his family was killed. He spent the rest of his life trying to kill his family’s killer and to kill the family of his family’s killer. An important, two part observation is made of this character: “Managua has a twisted heart. And he has become that which twisted him.” The evil which befell him replicated itself in him. He became that which he hated. And then he was incapable of doing anything else. When evil motivates us to respond in kind, it has already won. It has defeated us.

So it is that our hearts have been twisted, too. We have turned away from God, and now we cannot turn back to God. We cannot escape our fallen condition on our own. All of which is to say again that it is good for us that God takes the initiative in Jesus Christ to call whomever he wants to be with him. We do not take the initiative to do that, because we cannot, so it is good that God does that for us. Only God can untwist our hearts and make us whole again.

It is into the aching, deep loneliness of our lives that Jesus speaks his call to be with him. It is into the crushing boredom of the sameness of our existence that Jesus proclaims the excitement and freshness of the coming kingdom of God. It is into the crippling despair of always going farther and farther down that the crucified and resurrected Jesus speaks the uplifting word of hope. It is into the meaninglessness of the repetition of clock and calendar that Jesus gives us reason for being and doing. It is into the brokenness of hearts and lives, families and communities, and nations and the world that Jesus speaks the healing word of calling into existence a new community in and around him. This is why we are here today: to be transformed by the word and power of Christ from what we have been into what we are yet to become.

Jesus calls to himself those whom he wants, and they come to him. Not only does he take the initiative, but also his word has the power to do what he says. He calls, and they come. His call makes us disciples. This is sheer grace. Jesus left the synagogue of the old Israel, went up on the mountain, and appointed twelve apostles, creating a new Israel, a new people of God, a new community of faith to embody the gospel and to carry it to the world. Jesus defined the Christian life for those first disciples and also for us: he appointed twelve “so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach.” This is our very life, gathering here to be with Christ! And this results in our being sent out to bring others to Christ. If we do not go out from worship eager to share the good news and bring others back, it was not Christian worship we were in, and it was not Jesus Christ whom we met. Jesus calls to him those whom he wants, to be with him and to be sent out to preach the gospel. Faith and life, worship and mission, fellowship and ministry; these are two aspects of the Christian life, of the life of the church, and neither can exist without the other.

So it is that a strong and startling contrast is drawn between the great crowd and the disciples. We might think that the widespread attention being paid to Jesus was good: a great crowd followed him, they heard all that he was doing, and they came to him from every direction. He had healed many, so that all who had diseases pressed around him to touch him. But they did not care about the gospel. They did not care about the kingdom of God. In fact, they did not even care about Jesus. He had to tell his disciples to have a getaway boat ready for him, because he was afraid

the crowd would crush him! Jesus knew what they wanted: whatever they could get out of him for themselves. That was all. They were takers. They were consumers. They wanted the services he could provide them, and that was all.

No wonder Jesus went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted. Yes, of course those whom he called were also recipients of his grace and mercy, even more so than the crowd. But he called them, as he calls us, to be more than recipients and consumers. He calls us to be even more than disciples who follow him and are with him. He appoints us to be apostles, to be those who are sent out to share the gospel, to spread the good news, to bring others to Christ, and to give as freely as we have received.

That is what it means for Christians and for the Christian church to be more than recipients and consumers. We have no interest in criticizing the crowd for their shortcomings. The crowd is remembered in the word of God as a warning to the church of Jesus Christ in all ages and so to us today. We are always at risk of being mere consumers, takers, those who are glad only to receive the good gifts of God. That is always a danger for the church, and we read it today to warn us away from it.

In order that we might be more than consumers, we are given not only the negative warning of the crowd but also the positive example of the apostles. When Jesus calls them, they come. What Jesus names them, they are. Jesus recreates them as a new people, and so they are. And so are we today.

So how does this apply to us today? Jesus still calls us to be with him and to be sent out to preach the gospel. We are grateful for God's calling grace, grateful for God's good gifts and watchfulness and care over us, and grateful for our forgiveness, salvation, healing. And to say that we are grateful is to realize that we are called to be more than recipients and consumers of God's goods and services. To say that we are grateful is to say that we know the one to whom our gratitude is due, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. To say that we are grateful is to say that we are called into relationship with the one who is the author and sustainer of all life.

As individuals, we are given meaning and hope for our lives by this gospel. As the church, we are called into the twofold pattern of being with Jesus and being sent out. This is what it means to be the Christian church: called and sent, reconciled and reconciling, gathered and dispersed, being served and serving, being loved and loving, receiving and giving, hearing the word and speaking the word, learning and teaching, followers and laborers, consumers and producers, disciples and apostles. We worship and work, over and over again, inseparably.

Christ calls us together to be the people of God, reaching out to the world with his good news. Part of what it takes for us as the church to do that is the

generous and even sacrificial financial gifts of our members. Some people complain that churches ask for money too much and too often. But money is not the half of it: on behalf of God, the church asks that we love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, with all our strength! When the gospel of Jesus Christ gets through with us, our money will be the least of our concerns. We will gladly give all to God, because all that we are and all that we have belong to God.

Remember this in the coming weeks, as our Stewardship Division begins to ask us prayerfully to consider making our pledges for next year. Maybe we have not said it clearly enough before, but Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church needs a lot more money than we have been receiving to carry out and to increase the work of the church and the mission of Jesus Christ. There are two solutions to this shortfall. One is to attract more new members into the church, who can add their giving to ours, and we certainly want to do this. At the same time, we are asking every current member of Grace Covenant to make a financial pledge for a substantially and dramatically increased gift to our budget for next year. We need for all of us to give and to give in a way that honors God. Consider this: Is the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ important to you? Does Christ's sacrifice of his life on the cross for you mean anything to you? Is the church he started for us important to you? Is his gospel worthy of your gifts? Do you want to help support the current and future mission of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church for the neighborhood and world around us and for generations yet to come? It all comes down to this: we are asking all of us to make a financial pledge for a substantially and dramatically increased gift to our budget for next year. This is a crucial part of our discipleship and apostleship, a vital part of our obedience to Christ, an important way that we serve our Lord and carry out his work in the world.

Jesus "called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him." There is the whole reality of the church of Jesus Christ. Jesus appointed twelve "so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach." This is our very life, to be with Christ and to serve Christ! It was true then, and it is true now. This is who we are: Jesus called, and we came.

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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