

You Have Been Called

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday in Ordinary Time, January 26, 1997. Scripture Lessons: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Several years ago I was talking to a young man about joining the church. "Why should I join the church?" he said. "Well, for one thing" I said, "you get to vote in the annual congregational meeting." After a pregnant silence he responded, "You mean you want me to spend ninth months in a confirmation class, go to all kinds of service projects, write out a confession of faith, kiss up to the session - so I can vote in the congregational meeting?" Too often, church membership, is presented as a bland commitment to an institution rather than as a call to follow Jesus Christ with passionate intensity.

"As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea... And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him."

My guess is that James and John, Simon Peter and Andrew were teenagers. Maybe not as young as our confirmation class. But probably about 18 years old. Jesus called them. They followed. They followed Jesus to their death. According to ancient Christian traditions, James was beheaded by Herod Agrippa because he followed Christ. Andrew ended up getting crucified in Greece on an X shaped cross because he followed Jesus. Simon Peter was crucified upside down in Rome during the reign of the Emperor Nero because he dared to follow Jesus. John was thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil in Rome because he followed Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had it right when he wrote, "When Jesus calls us, he bids us come and die."

In a provocative editorial in *Theology Today* entitled *Beavis and Butt-Head Get Saved*, Tom Long tells about a telephone conversation he was having with a journalist, the religion editor of a weekly news magazine. "American Christians ought to be scared as hell" the journalist said to Long. American Christians should be frightened, he claimed, because Christians in the mainline churches simply are failing to pass on the faith to the younger generation. Eighty percent of the young people confirmed in the Presbyterian Church in the last forty years have left the church altogether. They're not going to fundamentalist churches. They're not going to churches with contemporary worship services. They're not going to church at all. We're failing in the most important area of all. We're failing to enable young people to respond to the call of Christ within Christ's church. Maybe, Long surmises, they've left, not because we make church membership too difficult, but we make it too easy, too bland, too boring. Join... vote.

Too often the church settles for mediocrity. Like *Beavis and Butt-Head*, we make fun of the heroic. *Beavis and Butt-Head*, for those who don't know, are two obnoxious adolescent boys featured in a popular MTV cartoon. The pair crack smutty jokes, make animal-like snorts and snickers, and frequently mutter, "That sucks." Long points out in his editorial that whenever *Beavis and Butt-Head* see any of their peers risk doing what's right even in the face of ridicule the verdict is swiftly

pronounced: "That sucks." "Beavis and Butt-Head work hard to make the world safe for mediocrity", writes Long.

Long sees the church doing the same thing. We too often offer mediocrity rather than extend Christ's costly call to discipleship. "The church should do more than serve our teenagers another slice of pizza and inquire whether they've decided to be a dentist or a vet." "It should", in Long's words, "call them out of the harbor and into the open sea, into the wind-swept, costly, sacrificial faith adventure of a lifetime".

One Christmas William Willimon preached a sermon calling people to follow Jesus in costly commitment. "For some of us Christ's call will come as a call to leave our nets, our books, our desks, our homes", he said. "For others it will come as a call to mend our nets, read our books more thoroughly, mind our desks more faithfully, live in our homes more lovingly. But in whatever form it comes, the call of Christ is a call to forsake being our own person and to become Christ's."

Well, a young medical student home for Christmas heard Willimon's sermon. She'd spent the previous summer at a church sponsored medical mission in Central America. As she listened to Willimon's sermon she heard Christ's call to leave the hope of a lucrative medical practice in the United States and return to Central America ^{to practice medicine among the poor} ~~as a medical missionary~~. She went home and shared the good news with her not so enthusiastic parents.

The next day Willimon got an angry telephone call from her father. "Rev. Willimon, my daughter says that after we've spent tens of thousands of dollars for her education she's going to

practice medicine for free in some Central American village. Talk some sense into her." Willimon reluctantly agreed to call his daughter. Her first words were, "Rev. Willimon, thanks to you I heard Christ call me to follow him to Central America." Willimon embarrassingly admits that his immediate response was, "I was just preaching. I didn't think you'd take me seriously."

But maybe that's the trouble with our churches. We don't expect our young people or ourselves to take discipleship seriously. Maybe we shouldn't encourage people to join the church by promising all kinds of benefits that will come to them and their families. Maybe we should, frankly, put a warning label at the top of the bulletin like the Surgeon General's warning on cigarettes: Church membership may be hazardous harmful to your health and cause premature death.

Christ calls us to follow him with passionate intensity. Christ walks by our homes and businesses and schools and calls each one of us to follow him. He entrusts us with some heroic task/ ^{in the home, school, office, factory or far away.} Christ calls us, not simply to vote in the congregational meeting, he calls us to extraordinary lives of witness to Christ's Lordship.

Oh, by the way, our church is sponsoring a ten day work mission to Nicaragua this summer. An information meeting will be held Thursday night, January 30, at 7:00 p.m. in the conference room. Maybe Christ's is calling you to go.

Let us pray: Loving God, through your Son you have called us to repent of our sin, to believe the good news, and to celebrate the coming of your kingdom. Like Christ's first apostles, may we hear his call to discipleship, and, forsaking old ways, proclaim the gospel of new life to a broken world; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one god, now and forever. Amen.