

August 21, 2005
Mr. Adam Fronczek

Homily on Matthew 16

C.S. Lewis, one of the great Christian authors of the twentieth century, spent most of his career as a professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Oxford and Cambridge. During World War II, Lewis gave a talk to Oxford students to help them understand how to justify an academic career in a desperate time of war.

Lewis dealt with the question in an interesting way; he said that Christians can't really find appropriate answers for this question in a time of war unless they have first asked the right questions about how to live in a time of peace. The question of what Christians are called to do is essentially the same in desperate times as it is in ordinary times.

In my ministry, more than any other subject, believers talk to me about what they feel called to do in ordinary times. Look to your left and to your right, in front of you and behind you, and I'm quite sure that someone, close by, awakens these days asking questions about what grander purposes lie within their daily work. Maybe the person asking the questions is you. "Why am I doing what I'm doing?" "Am I supposed to be going about my work in a different way?" "Am I supposed to be doing something different altogether?" "Does God have some kind of a plan for me, some kind of call on my life?"

These questions are common in the pews here this morning, and these questions have been common among Christians throughout history. And the answers are as unique as the people who do the asking.

Take a couple of C.S. Lewis' contemporaries: Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran theologian; he did much of his writing in the 1930's. Bonhoeffer was one of many German Lutherans who spoke out against the Nazi party's misuse of the gospel to influence the German people. He had many opportunities to leave Germany, but he stayed in his homeland anyway, leading a struggle against Nazism that ultimately cost him his life. When Bonhoeffer talks about God's call on our lives, he talks about obedience and action. Not only does faith lead to obedience, says Bonhoeffer, but obedience leads to faith. We are seldom given any exact description or program of what it means to follow Jesus, but the key, is to start following him. Only in that kind of obedient living, only in trying to walk the Christian walk, can we discover what it truly means to believe.

On the other end of the spectrum was the young and precociously brilliant French philosopher Simone Weil. Weil was part of the French Resistance during World War II. She fled to England when the Nazis invaded, where she died of malnourishment and tuberculosis because she refused to eat more than the meager food rations that were being given to her brothers and sisters who had remained in France. Simone Weil possessed a highly spiritual as well as a speculative mind and she thought that seeking God's call is about having the patience and openness and clarity to receive what God has to tell us. "Above all," she said, "our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it."

These two examples show the rich variety of what it might mean to be “called” by God. It’s my hunch that when the person who is speaking or writing is a theologian, or a philosopher, or an author, we’re not surprised to find different interpretations, or a lack of clarity about what it means to be called. On the other hand, I suspect that we tend to think that in the Bible, when God or Jesus is right there to call someone, we expect that the call is clear. God says to Isaiah, “Whom shall I send, and who shall go for us?” and Isaiah says, “Here am I; Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8). Paul is called on the road to Damascus and is struck blind, and when he receives his sight it says that he “was baptized...and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues...” (Acts 9:18-20). And then there’s Andrew and his brother Simon, or Peter, who we read about today. Jesus meets them when they are fishermen and says, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people. Immediately, they left their nets and followed him.” (Matthew 4:19-20)

But if we look at the whole picture of Peter in the gospels, we get the sense that Peter’s call is a bit more complex than the idea that he left his fishing nets and immediately understood Christ’s plan for his life.

Maybe you remember this story: The disciples have spent the night on a boat and they’ve drifted out to sea and in the morning, they see Jesus walking across the water toward the boat. Well, understandably, the disciples are afraid, seeing this man walking across the water, and Peter calls out to Jesus, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus commands Peter to come but as Peter starts out of the boat and across the water, the wind picks up and Peter loses his confidence and begins to sink, crying out, “Lord, save me!” And Jesus, catching Peter, says, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:28-33).

Some would say that this is a typical story about discipleship—Peter intends to be faithful and trust Jesus, but he doesn’t have the follow-through to get it done. But there’s also the idea that we’re seeing a sort of progression of Peter’s sense of call. In Peter’s initial call, when he’s a fisherman, there’s no great threat, and we’re not told much about the call, just that Jesus called, and Peter went. In the story on the water though, the winds have begun to blow. Following the call has become more risky, Peter is out in the middle of the sea, far from his comfort zone, and he calls back to Jesus for help.

This is a bit closer, I think, to what most of us experience when we sense God’s call. We want to trust what we feel called to do, but then the winds start to blow. When I listen to people tell me about God’s call on their lives, I hear the winds blowing. People say things like, “I’d like to commit to that great thing going on at the church, but until the kids are older, it just isn’t possible.” “I want to cut back my hours at work, but until the loans are paid back it just isn’t an option.” “I want to move my career in a new direction, but I just can’t give up the benefits at my current job.”

These are valid concerns. I wouldn’t dare trivialize a one of them. But don’t trivialize Peter either. Peter, a fisherman who knows the dangers of the sea, is walking on the water in the middle of a storm.

We hear about the next phase of Peter's call in the passage of Scripture we read today. Certainly by this time, Peter knows what it means to be called, because this is it. This is the passage that tells us where the church came from; this is what makes Peter so special, so different from the rest of us. If you've been to St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, you've looked up into the dome and seen it in the huge, gold letters, "Tu es Petrus et super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam." "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church."

When Jesus said that, St. Peter's Basilica wasn't built yet. The Emperor Constantine had not yet made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. The Apostles' Creed had not yet been written, Paul was not yet proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues, Christians were not yet gathering to celebrate the Lord's Supper in small house churches, and no one was proclaiming salvation from sin and death through Christ crucified because Christ was still walking the earth, apparently as human as you and me.

I read this passage and I think that like you, and me, and Simone Weil, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, even Peter "the rock on which I will build my church," is anxious and unsure, and doubtful about what it is that he's being called to do.

Complicated as it is, passages like this one are where we need to look when we ask what it means to be called. Let's look closely at this passage for a moment; it begins with a question. Jesus wants to know who people are saying that he is. The disciples answer Jesus, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Then Jesus wants to know who the disciples say that he is. Here Peter takes a step; he stands apart from the ambiguity of the crowd and says to Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:14-16)

You may not realize it, but we face this question everyday; this is where being called begins. Most people have a guess about who Jesus is, most of us have a subtle sense of how he wants us to live, but seldom are people willing to take the step that Peter takes.

We know this was the right thing for Peter to say because Jesus answers, "Blessed are you, Simon, Son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." (Matthew 16:17)

This is the right thing to say because Peter, if just for a moment, has stopped paying attention to what other people are saying about Jesus and he's listening to the Spirit. It's like us listening for once to those voices inside our heads that question the world around us. Do you ever hear these questions:

Do I believe something different than what the world tells me to believe?

Could I really live with the security that comes from something other than looking good, having the right stuff, saying and doing the right things?

Could I live as if I worship God, and not all these other things?

This confession that Peter makes is the one we have to make in order to understand what it means to be called. We have to look at what the world believes and ask if we are being trapped by those things, and we have to be willing to put our trust in something greater. Do you feel trapped by your job or your 401k? Do you feel trapped by the need to look right,

to say the safe things, to wear the right clothes and to keep a stiff upper lip? Maybe it's time to say, like Peter, that Christ, the one who offers us freedom from all of these traps; Christ is Lord of my life.

It's only alongside this confession that Jesus says to Peter, "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." Peter starts on the road to understanding his call because, even though he does not fully understand that call yet, he is willing to say what he wants so badly to believe.

But this isn't the end of the story for Peter. Peter has received his call from Jesus, he has committed himself to Christ's Lordship over his life, but the very next thing that happens is that, again, Peter starts to sink. Jesus foretells his death. Jesus acknowledges that he will suffer, and Peter, still riding that emotional high from embracing his call, says, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." And it's at that point that Jesus says "Get behind me, Satan, you are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (Matthew 16:22-23)

Already, Peter is slipping back to the human things that have trapped him all along. Even at the first moments after he receives his call, we can already see how tough it's going to be for Peter. He's gone from a rock to a stumbling block in a few short moments. He wants to be freed from the demands of life in this world, the things that keep him from chasing his call, and he just can't quite get it right. But somehow, sometime, Peter found his call. Somehow, his name made it into those big gold letters in the dome.

We look at Peter, and Paul, and Isaiah, and so many others who were called in the Bible with hindsight. We can see what they did because it's done, but when the call came, none of these people knew how things would turn out. But they acknowledged the presence of God in their lives and asked God to free them from the things that had them trapped.

When the call becomes challenging, like when Peter began to sink as he walked across the water toward Jesus, every one of us can cry out, like Peter did, "Lord, help me!" Why? Because this story ultimately isn't about Peter. It's about Jesus. Jesus is the one calling you. And he knows that the traps of this world are hard for us to escape; he knows that we'll begin to sink when the seas start to get rough, and he knows that we'll avoid our call just the way Peter does, but he calls us still. Jesus is so very bold in calling us. He has to be bold in calling us because he knows if we don't listen to his call, we'll listen to something else, and he loves us too much to let us do that.

We often think about how we'll embrace our call later, when it's easier or more convenient; when the mortgage or the college loans are paid off, when this or that big project at work is complete, when the market takes a turn for the better...

Let me tell you what C.S. Lewis might say about that: When he spoke to his Oxford students about what it means to be called, C.S. Lewis said the essential thing to understand about being called to Christian service is that people who are called are still human beings like everyone else. Being called doesn't mean you can suspend life. Lewis said to his students, you're here at Oxford in a time of war because "if you don't read good books, you will read bad ones. If you don't go on thinking rationally, you will think irrationally."

The point is that you can't suspend life. Life moves on. If you attempt to suspend your call, you'll only succeed in substituting a worse life for a better one. We may not fully understand our call, but make no mistake about it; there is nothing innocent about not paying attention to God's call, because we all pay attention to some kind of a call. The question is whether or not it's God's.

It would be foolish to think that God's call is always clear to us, or that we can always interpret it correctly. Sometimes we have to listen to Simone Weil, empty ourselves and wait for God to speak. Other times we have to listen to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and commit ourselves to action, hoping to find Christ as we learn to obey him. But don't doubt it—Christ calls people who don't yet understand their call and he places us here, in the church, so that we might help one another find out what Christ means to do with us.

What are you doing, in this community, to figure out God's call on your life?