

## God's Calling for Everyone

Mark 10:32-45

As children of Abraham, the Bible is our foundational story. As Christians, the New Testament story shapes us. The gospels are our stories about Jesus, whose name we bear. Today, we begin with a story about Jesus from the Gospel of Mark.

They were on road again, headed toward Jerusalem for the last time. Jesus continues teaching his followers his understanding of the nature of God, what we're calling the *way of the cross*. Jesus is walking ahead of his disciples, probably enjoying some time alone. They follow behind, apparently nervously thinking about what Jesus was teaching them concerning God's realm. He used phrases such as "the last are first" and "the weak are strong." He said that you have to *become a child* in order to enter the kingdom! These sayings were very troubling and somewhat unnerving.

At last, the disciples catch up or Jesus slows down? They get together and Jesus tries to explain again what he's doing. He tells them what will happen when they reach Jerusalem. He doesn't pull any punches. He will be arrested, interrogated, beaten, and killed.

The disciples didn't get it! It's as though they were not really listening. Jesus finishes talking and, right away, James and John ask him for a special privilege, to sit in places of honor in Jesus' new kingdom. What are they missing? They're still thinking of Jesus as a triumphant, conquering Messiah!

Jesus was irritated. The disciples were clueless. Among the things they failed to grasp was that Jesus was about to live out exactly what he had been teaching them. He was going to Jerusalem and there he was to die. In defeat, he would overcome the winners. In failure, he would triumph over the powers of hate and death.

Jesus must have taken a deep breath. Then, he responds to James and John, "Can you drink my cup? Can you be baptized with my baptism?" "Oh, yes, we can!" They did not know what they were saying.

The other disciples, when they finally caught on to what was happening, were indignant that James and John had made such a request. Of course, they, too, had missed the whole point. They, too, were still vying for power! So, Jesus tries one more time to explain. "You guys are thinking just like the rulers and people of power – the very ones I've been criticizing. Your goal is not to become people of power. Just the opposite, you are to reject politics as usual. It's like this: to become great, be a slave." Crucifixion was a punishment for runaway slaves. The places of honor at Jesus' right and left hand were occupied by two thieves who were crucified with him.

Jesus embodies what he teaches. He walks the way of the cross. He lives the way of active and non-violent resistance to the powers of his day. The Jesus of Mark's gospel challenged oppressive social systems where women and children were subjugated by men. In God's realm, women have equal rights with men.

It's interesting that women appear in Mark's gospel without husbands. This would have made them third class citizens in that culture. Jesus never ostracizes them. The same is true of children. While the male disciples never seem to grasp the message, the female disciples embody Jesus' ideal of leadership through service. The Greek word for this is *diakonia* from which comes our word *deacon*.

The early Christians were said to have "turned the world upside down." If that was true, they were following Jesus whose way of the cross transformed what people understood about the

nature of God. His was a radical reinterpretation of what's up and what's down. This is our faith heritage and is summarized by Ken Medema in his song *Flying Upside Down*

When you're upside down, your open eyes  
will suddenly come to realize  
the wisdom that the blind despise  
rich are poor and fools are wise  
now the light exposes the lies  
and sees the wolf in a sheep's disguise  
and shuns the power that money buys  
and hears the pain that the sufferer cries  
now at last your mind is free  
free to love your enemy  
to dream a new community  
and see a new reality  
free to love simplicity  
to offer hospitality  
to work for peace and harmony  
and stand against dishonesty  
turn it over, turn it round  
raise the humble, free the bound  
down is up and up is down  
the world looks different to you  
when you're flyin' upside down.

The question for today, for our lives, is this: to what is God calling us? Mark's gospel tells us God calls us to walk the way of the cross, to live this upside down way of equal rights, non-violence, and inside out priorities. Jesus followed his vision, his calling, with courage, despite the dangers and challenges. That is what God calls each of us to do. The themes of the day, then, include: walking with God, being creative, taking risks, paying attention to life, and trusting in the process.

How do I hear God's particular call for me? How can I become aware of the Spirit's movement in my life? This weekend, I participated in a listening forum sponsored by UMKC, Rockhurst University, and the International Listening Association. The focus was listening to each other, ourselves, and God. The agenda was to emphasize the importance of listening in the fields of business, health care, research, education, and religion/spirituality.

Hearing God's call is all about listening. Whether or not you believe God calls people is a matter of faith and interpretation. If you don't believe God calls, at least in some sense, there's probably no point listening to the rest of this sermon. If you do believe, or believe the idea has possibilities, then I suggest it's worth the time and effort to listen and learn. 7.

Among the reading material for this listening forum was a description of three qualities that are essential for listening to become a sacred art. The first quality is silence. Silence creates a space for listening to the reality at the core of my life – God. Silence is the filtering out of noise rather than the absence of sound. It is the absence of noise and the ability to let go distractions and competing voices. It is the space to be open to being loved and accepted, the space where our deepest thoughts float up from the inner self – silence.

The second quality is reflection. Reflection is slowing down in order to open up the inner self. It is the practice of breathing first before jumping into action. An exercise for reflection is

this: before responding to any question, repeat the question and reflect on your direction for thirty seconds before speaking or before acting. One person doing this exercise was sure of his answer immediately and planned to just count to thirty, but during the silence, he noticed a deepening sense of surprise at how his answer had changed during the time of reflection.

The third quality is presence. The quality of presence is taking a mundane and ordinary activity and giving it full attention. It is the practice and ability to be present with another and with your self. The author tells of a ritual of sacred listening she practices. Each day, she lights a candle, the symbol for light, for Spirit, and for Source.

She tells about one mother who had the practice at home of lighting a candle whenever she had an important conversation with daughter. These conversations helped both of them through some difficult times. One day, while she was rushing to leave house in order to catch a plane, her daughter asked to talk a minute. She was about to put her off when, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the candle was lit. Needless to say, she stayed and listened.

Such a ritual acknowledges the sacred right here, right now. The candle flame is a reminder to look for light in ourselves and each other each day. It is the light of the Spirit's presence, God's call slowly growing. It may represent the illumination you are seeking and maybe finding. Where may God be kindling a light within you?

There is an ancient Christian tradition that  
God sends each person into this world  
With a special message to deliver  
A special song to sing  
Or a special act of love to bestow  
No one else can speak your message  
No one else can sing your song  
No one else can offer your act of love  
These are entrusted only to you  
(John Powell, *Through Seasons of the Heart*)

Give me a candle, O God  
As I go down into the deeps of my being  
Down to the spring of my life  
Show me the hidden things  
Give me freedom to grow and become that self  
The seed of which you planted in me at my making  
(George Appleton, *One Man's Prayers*)

We are not powerless in the oppressive situations  
In which we feel caught  
We are not bound to the reality we see  
We are creators. We can make the new!  
(Elizabeth O'Connor, *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*)

In the discernment of call, not only is it a matter of  
*What do I long to do?*  
It can also be a matter of  
*What am I running away from?*

*What am I resisting?*

(Judith Roark & Myra Flood in conversation)

Call asks that we set out from a place that's  
Familiar and relatively secure  
For a destination that can be only dimly perceived  
One that we cannot be certain of reaching  
Call requires a journey, sometimes geographical  
(Elizabeth O'Connor, *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*)

If you have some idea what God calling you to  
Is there some small step you can take toward it?  
Usually one step at a time is clear  
Nothing will be clear beyond that step  
Until you have taken it  
(Francis Dewar, *Invitations*)

Go on, Lord, love us into wholeness  
Set us free to share with you  
In your creative joy  
To laugh with you at your delight  
On us, your works of art  
(Ann Lewin, *Candles and Kingfishers*)