

“Calling and Resistance”
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
July 7, 2019

I have often said that the one thing that sustains me in the difficult moments of ministry is the clear sense of calling I had at the beginning of my journey which was affirmed at my ordination. God’s claim on my life was clear, and when I am tempted to question that claim, I recall the presence and affirmation of several hundred people at my ordination. If I was confused, a lot of people shared that confusion.

Of course, in the most difficult moments of all, when I have referenced this call, my beloved has said, with a smile, tongue-in-cheek, “Did you have Caller ID working that day?” It is not a serious questioning of my calling, just a recognition of how turbulent this journey can be for many different reasons.

When a Presbyterian minister in Virginia preached a sermon years ago on racial reconciliation, he was told by a prominent member that he gave the

church \$4,000 a year, a lot of money in that day, and because of that sermon, he would not be giving any more. The minister had the hutzpah to offer an appropriate reply. He said, “Thank you! No one has ever told me that a single sermon of mine was worth \$4,000.” But even through the levity, he felt the attack, not just a different point of view, but a personal threat for having had the courage to preach the Gospel.

More recently I learned why some close friends of ours in the church I served in Richmond stopped coming. It was an interracial couple. Gardner, who happened to be African-American, played tennis and chess with me, and we did a number of things together as families. Dana found out from his wife years later after we had moved to Winston-Salem that they quit coming after a group of people in the church went to the bank where he worked and told him that they had come to terms with the fact that maybe we had to be in church together, but that we had no business doing things together socially. That explained a lot about some undercurrents we felt in that church.

These are just two illustrations of challenges connected to one issue, and there are many more

illustrations and issues which point to the challenges of ministry, but this is a part of the calling. And the truth is any significant kind of work involves stress, anything worth doing has challenges; we need look no further than the founding of this nation.

It was a mighty struggle to birth what has become the United States of America. It was worth every ounce of blood spilled, every ulcer incurred, but it was a mighty struggle. We often think of July 4 as the day it was all settled, and it was a defining day, but matters were not settled with a Declaration of Independence. As David McCullough's masterful book *1776* documents, the fight for liberty was ongoing. In fact, there are principles we are still struggling to live up to in this day.

But in ministry, and I don't just mean ordained ministry, but the ministry of the church as a whole, challenges are involved because our calling is to follow Jesus. And if we recall, we are following him on a road to a cross, not on some kind of everlasting Disney Parade. In last week's Gospel reading, Jesus says to people who want to follow him things like – foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of man has no where to lay his head... let the dead bury their own dead... (and) no one who puts a hand to

the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God (Luke 9:57-62). No wonder challenges are involved.

This aspect of discipleship is evident in today's reading from Luke. Jesus appoints seventy people, in addition to his first disciples, to go out and spread the good news of God's realm, tell people about Jesus, cure the sick - basically follow him. It is a sacred calling, but included in this calling is a heads-up about the inevitable reality of resistance. Where people welcome you, Jesus says, proclaim the nearness of God's reign; but where they do not, wipe the dust off your feet. Resistance is not a hypothetical possibility. Jesus does not say, "In the unlikely event that someone might not welcome you, it is 'O.K.' to move on." He assumes there will be resistance to their calling right from the very beginning and offers them a way to manage that resistance.

But before we consider the resistance, we need to be clear about the calling and what it implies for us. The seventy are sent forth to follow Jesus – to proclaim the good news of God's nearness in him, heal the sick and practice hospitality, extending

welcome to others and receiving the welcome others provide in different ways, including food; eat what is set before you, he says. Jesus begins this ministry, then calls twelve followers and now sends out seventy more. But it doesn't stop there because he also says the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; so, pray that God might send more laborers.

The trajectory is clear – more and more people need to be involved. All of us are called as followers of Jesus to carry out his mission. Baptists tend to think that we ushered in the democratization of the Spirit. We believe in the priesthood of all believers - that all of us can go directly to God in prayer, all of us are free to interpret scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and all of us are called to ministry. The only credential we need is baptism.

But the truth is the process of democratization begins with Jesus calling all followers to ministry. It continues with the Holy Spirit being poured out on all flesh on Pentecost so that sons and daughters may prophesy, the young may see visions and the old may dream dreams (Acts 2:17). And it is still at work today as the harvest is still plentiful and the

laborers are still too few. All are called and all are needed.

Yet, in this sacred calling we all share, we will meet resistance. We may wonder why anyone would not want to hear the Good News about God's reign in Christ, but not everyone believes the basic claims of Christian faith and the truth is the idea that God is uniquely in one man is not easy to embrace nor are the understandings we have of the cross or the claims we make about resurrection. To insiders, these are basic tenets of faith, but to outsiders they are outrageous claims.

We may wonder why anyone would not want to be healed, but power always threatens, healing comes in many different forms and those who have a stake in the systems of disease don't like healing. Drug dealers, for example, are not particularly fond of ministers, counselors and friends who help people with addictions get clean. Healing inevitably brings changes of many kinds.

And we may wonder why anyone would be against hospitality. Who doesn't want to be welcomed? Well, the issue is not with being welcomed but extending welcome. Most of us have a list of other people we don't want to include. In Jesus' time it

was Gentiles, Samaritans, lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors. In our time various lines are drawn to exclude persons of color, those who come from other nations (particularly if they have dark skin), people of minority identities, those who have been incarcerated.

And people have their reasons for being exclusive, even people who think of themselves as good Christian people have their reasons, maybe even a Bible verse or two. The trouble is Jesus doesn't put any limits on his hospitality. Eat what is put before you, eat with whomever will welcome you and welcome them. Jesus eats with everyone. It's one of the things that inspires the most criticism of him. The Pharisees and scribes complain bitterly that he "welcomes sinners and eats with them (Luke 15:2)." Whenever we follow him in this practice of radical hospitality, we too will be the subject of grumbling and complaint. We too will meet resistance. When we do, Jesus says, when and not if, we should wipe the dust off our feet and move on.

There are at least a couple of implications for us in this teaching. First of all, Jesus seems to be telling us to do ministry when and where we can,

with the people who will embrace our ministry. There is nothing to be gained by investing time with those who reject our efforts.

A mentor of mine, Ron Higdon, talked often about the 80-10-10 rule. As a minister in a church, he said, 10% of the people will think you are one of the finest gifts God ever gave to the church. They will love and support you no matter what you do. Another 10% will wonder what in the world you could have confused with a calling from God, and even more so what the search committee was thinking. Nothing you do will ever please them. The other 80% will work with you as long as they sense that you genuinely care about them and the Gospel and are willing to work.

Spend time with the first 10%, he said, especially when you are down and need support. Don't ignore the second 10%, but don't overindulge their every demand, thinking that one more kind gesture might make a difference; it won't. But spend most of your time with the 80% so as to forward the cause of the church the most. It is wise counsel, grounded in the words of Jesus about wiping dust off feet.

It is similar to a message shared at a deacons retreat in Winston-Salem. One year we invited pastoral care professor Dan Bagby to lead our discussion on deacon ministry, and in advance, we had the deacons write down particular challenges they had and specific things with which they would like help. People named many different concerns ranging from grief ministry and divorce workshops all the way to help with responding to addiction and suicide, but one of the most common requests was for help in contacting people on deacon care lists who had not been to church in many years and didn't seem to want to any contact.

What they didn't know at the time, what I didn't know, was that Dan wrote his doctoral dissertation on ministering to people on the fringes of church life. So, he was immensely helpful, though what he said was not what most expected. Basically what he said was that those who had been away for a long time were probably not coming back. They had a longstanding conflict with God, the church or someone in it, and they had made up their mind. The goal in any contact should be to offer care and support, not to bring them back. When the latter might happen, it would be because the goal was

ministry, not a request to come sit on a pew. Most importantly, he said, spend your energy ministering to people who will receive it. That way fewer people would become estranged and deacons would feel less stress. It too was wise counsel.

But there is a second implication for us in Jesus' teaching about wiping the dust off our feet - a simple recognition of the inevitability of resistance. We have developed an assumption in this culture that if we are doing what we ought to be doing, church life will go smoothly and no one will get upset. Any hint of resistance, therefore, is a sign that we are getting off-track. Imagine where we would be if Jesus bought into such an assumption! There would be no suffering and sacrifice, no teachings about feeding the hungry and welcoming the stranger, no talk about who will be welcome at the great feast of eternity, no cross or empty tomb. Jesus didn't seek conflict, he went about his work as he felt led, but he never let resistance deter him from his path. In some ways, it almost seems like the opposite of our cultural assumption is correct. Resistance is often a sign that we are on-track because we are challenging the systems of this world with the system of God.

A friend of mine named Andy Manis who is a church historian wrote a biography of civil rights leader Fred Shuttlesworth. It is a fine work with many compelling stories and quotes, but I love a particular passage in an interview with Rev. Shuttlesworth. He was talking about the need to challenge oppression, wherever it exists, and how this calling is grounded in the Bible. Elijah challenges Jezebel and the prophets of Baal, as we have noted recently. Moses challenges Pharaoh. Jesus challenges both the Roman system of oppression and the Pharisaical one. And then he says he remembers what Dr. William Holmes Borders said. “The book of Acts is an action book. The gospel will get you in trouble; but God will get you out.” “That’s a true statement,” Shuttlesworth said, “and if you aren’t... running over somebody’s feeling, making and overcoming enemies, then it’s not the gospel...”

They are heavy words for nice people like us, people who generally benefit from the way things are. We may even want to offer a little resistance to them. But they are Gospel words, grounded in sacred tradition and the teachings of our Lord, making them difficult to dismiss completely.

Another mentor of mine, Glenn Hinson, once referred to an old professor he knew in his early years who was pretty crusty but got straight to the point. One of his sayings was this – if they come running like hogs after slop, it ain't the gospel!

My English Literature Professor mother might have quarreled with the grammar, but the message is difficult to dispute. When we are baptized, we confess Christ as Savior *and* Lord. We tend to emphasize the Savior role, but both parts of the confession are essential, and the earliest confession of the church was actually – Jesus is Lord. In other words, Jesus is our Savior, but he is also our Guide. We follow him in all things, and when we do, we meet resistance. That's "O.K.", it's all part of it; for we also know great joy, and we have the peace that comes from knowing we are right where God wants us to be.