

January 26, 2020 “We are meant to follow Jesus” Year A

A few years ago, a news clip featuring Steve Harvey standing in the lobby at Trump Tower caught my attention.

Apparently, he had been invited by both transition teams to a conversation with the President Elect and Ben Carson, nominee for Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. They want him to join them in addressing the need for urban renewal in major cities across the country.

Naturally, there were and are a whole lot of questions about his being there, but this is what I heard. Mr. Harvey is experiencing this as a kind of call. In fact, this is what he said, “Your career is what you are paid for, and your calling is what you are made for.”

Indeed, there is that for which you are made. You can see the full news clip here.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/video/steve-harvey-on-his-meeting-with-donald-trump/>

And oh, it certainly must have been so that Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John sensed that they were made for something beyond the work they had been raised in. In fact, I can only imagine they experienced some kind of restlessness or yearning long before Jesus entered the scene. Although certainly they had already determined that ‘something more’ was somehow related to their faith.

I have become more deeply acquainted with another story like this one in the last few days.

Now I first heard of Mrs. Elliott’s “Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes” exercise back when I was in school. (All you have to do is put her name in your search engine and you can learn more.) The crux of the story is this. She was teaching 3rd grade in a small town in Northeast Iowa the day that Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. For reasons perhaps difficult to understand from her own upbringing, Jane had a deep commitment to racial justice. And so over night she devised an experience whereby the next day she

divided her class into two, giving the brown eyed children privileges and relegating the blue-eyed ones to the ‘back of the room’ in all ways. She reversed their roles on the following Monday. The learning from this exercise was profound — including, but certainly not limited to the recognition that prejudice and racism are learned, not innate to us. If you want to read her account of this experiment, you can order her book here. If you wish to view the Frontline documentary about it, “A Class Divided,”

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/class-divided/>

Here is what stays with me from her account — something I never considered when I first heard of her work — indeed not until I read it in her own words. She and her husband and her children paid a price for the courage she showed in 1968 when she followed her call to live in keeping with ‘that for which she was made.’

Indeed, she begins her book with a letter to her four children — not one of apology, but of explanation — wanting them to hear

and understand through her own words her sense of call in this vitally important work.

It goes without saying, of course that the same must have been true for those first ones who left their former lives behind to follow Jesus. Indeed, this really comes home to me in Zebedee this week — one who, no doubt, had raised his sons to be part of the family business — but who found himself and his family abandoned because James and John heard and responded to another call. Oh, it must have been a true and real sacrifice — not only for James and John but for all who depended on them. Indeed, one can only imagine that their sacrifice extended far beyond an economic one, for young men did not simply leave their ‘father’s house’ to be about other things — especially not something as seemingly frivolous as following an itinerant rabbi.

Jesus called ordinary people right in the middle of their ordinary lives to do extraordinary things ... and he still does.

Part of the challenge of a passage like this is that it is so difficult for most of us to imagine getting up and leaving everyone and everything we know to follow Jesus. And so we figure the disciples were extraordinary, first-century super heroes of the faith that we can admire but not identify with.

Jesus issues the same call to us -- to be in genuine and real relationships with the people around us, and to be in those relationships the way Jesus was and is in relationship with his disciples and with us: bearing each other's burdens, caring for each other and especially the vulnerable, holding onto each other through thick and thin, always with the hope and promise of God's abundant grace. Sometimes that call -- to be in Christ-shaped relationship with others -- will take us far from home and sometimes it will take shape in and among the persons right around us. But it will always involve persons -- not simply a mission or a ministry or a movement, but actual, flesh-and-blood persons.

So maybe I should re-state, Jesus called ordinary people right in the middle of their ordinary lives to be in relationship with the ordinary people all around them and through that did extraordinary things ... and he still does.

You see, it's not just that Jesus is just now calling our folks to be fishers of people, but that Jesus has been calling them -- and in fact using them -- to care for those God loves so much for quite a long time.

I don't know whether this will redeem "vocation" as a helpful word in our day, but I'm not sure that's our primary concern. I am convinced, however, that it will help people imagine and believe that God is already working in them and through them to care for those around them, drawing all of us into deeper, Christ-shaped relationships with those God has placed in our lives. And that, I think, is precisely what it means to be a disciple and fisher of people. And so this is where I am landing this week.

There is that for which we are paid and there is that for which we are made. For each and all of us. And I wonder what that means in each of our journeys. More precisely, what does it mean for those of us who have followed a particular call into a particular kind of work for which we are paid?

Are we, in fact, made for some aspect of this or all aspects of this? Or is there something outside of this which holds an even deeper, truer call?

Recognizing ‘that for which we are made’ and acting upon it always means something or a whole lot of some things have to change. For ourselves, yes, and most likely for those closest to us. This was true for Jane Elliott. This is true for Steve Harvey. This was, is and will be true for all who heed the call to follow Jesus. Always. And so what does that mean?

What might that mean for you?

And how will you deal with it when it gets hard?

For it surely will...

The change is worth it. Always and in all ways. It may be difficult. It may well be painful. And it may be so that pain may not appear to have an end in sight. But in the end, following the call to ‘that for which we are made’ is all there is. I know the disciples experienced this. I understand Jane Elliott did as well.

How about you?

Have you found this to be so?

Why or why not?

I have offered a couple of examples of what ‘following one’s call’ might look like.

What have you seen lately which would also illustrate this?