

The story of Jesus' calling to the first disciples  
has captivated Christians for centuries.

The story is captivating  
because it is so simple.

In chapter 1 of Mark's Gospel  
we read that Jesus found Simon Peter and his brother Andrew  
fishing in the Sea of Galilee.

He said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."  
And *immediately* they left their nets, and followed him.

Likewise Jesus called to James, son of Zebedee,  
and his brother John,  
who were mending nets in their boats.  
And *immediately* they got out of their boats and followed him.

These stories are shocking, in part,  
because the disciples left *everything* behind –  
not just their nets and their boats,  
but their very *livelihoods*,  
and their *homes* and *friends* and *families* –  
all to follow after Jesus.

But for me the most remarkable thing about this story  
is not *what* the disciples left behind,  
but *that* they left it all so quickly—so suddenly—  
with no hesitation at all.

And they made this immediate decision to leave everything behind  
without being given any reason to do so

As you will notice from a quick reading of Mark's Gospel,  
Jesus had not started teaching or healing  
when he first encountered the disciples by the sea

The men had not been given any instructions,  
or promised any rewards, for becomes disciples of Jesus

All they received was a command to follow.  
And follow, they obediently did.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer  
was once himself captivated by these call stories in Mark's Gospel,  
and I want to read you something he wrote about them.

He asked: "How could the call *immediately* evoke obedience?  
The story is a stumbling-block for... [our] reason,  
and it is no wonder that frantic attempts have been made  
to separate the two events....

Something must have happened in between [the call and response]....

Thus we get the stupid question:  
Surely the [disciples] must have known Jesus before,  
and that previous acquaintance explains [their] readiness  
to hear the Master's call."

But, as Bonhoeffer points out, the Scripture does not mention any prior acquaintance;  
in fact it seems determined to make clear  
that the disciples had only just met Jesus and received his call  
when they decided to get up and follow him

By why would Scripture be so insistent on this point?  
Bonhoeffer says it's because  
the *reason* why the disciples get up and follow  
is none other than Jesus Christ

"It is Jesus who calls,  
and because it is Jesus, [the disciples follow] at once."<sup>1</sup>

I think what Bonhoeffer meant to say in this passage  
is that the disciples answer the call of Jesus so quickly  
because they see *God* in him.

They see that Jesus is not just a man,  
whose claims on them have to be considered;

he is Christ, the Lord,  
whose divine authority  
is immediately evident to them,  
and so whose call becomes to them a command.

*Because Jesus is Christ, the Lord,  
they will follow him wherever he goes  
without a second thought as to what they have left behind*

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<sup>1</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1959), 57-58

*or what might lie ahead*

Now, you might wonder what this story has to do with us, today.

After all, Jesus doesn't walk among us  
as he walked among the first disciples

At least, he doesn't walk among us *in the flesh*.

Instead, we say, he walks among us in the *Spirit*.

But, you might wonder,  
does the Spirit still call disciples today  
in such a direct, definitive way as Christ called the first disciples?

Do disciples of Christ still perceive so clearly that it is him calling,  
so that they immediately get up and follow him,  
leaving everything else behind?

I think so.

And one man whose life, I think, evinces such a clear calling by Christ  
is Dietrich Bonhoeffer  
whose famous text on discipleship  
I have just been reading

As some of you may know,  
Bonhoeffer was not just a theologian who thought and wrote  
about the calling of Christ;

he was a Christian pastor and spiritual leader  
who followed Christ faithfully in his own life.

Bonhoeffer lived in Germany, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century  
and was an active and outspoken opponent of Nazism.

After founding a new "Confessing" Church in opposition to the Protestant Churches  
which were taken over by the Nazi party in 1933,  
he organized and led an underground seminary  
to train Christian pastors

In 1943, Bonhoeffer was implicated in a plot to assassinate Hitler,  
and was imprisoned and then executed  
shortly before the end of World War II.

Before Bonhoeffer decided to join the resistance movement,  
he had moved to the United States,  
where he had hoped to find refuge from the war  
and study some theology in peace

But, almost as soon as he had arrived in the States,  
he felt a sudden sense that he should not be there,  
that he should return to Germany,  
because God was calling him back home

Now, Bonhoeffer did not think it was the general duty of Germans  
to remain in their country during the war

As he wrote later to a friend,  
“To hold out to the last may be commanded,”  
but “to flee may also be allowed [and] perhaps even demanded....  
[for] God does not call everyone to martyrdom.”<sup>2</sup>

But Bonhoeffer also thought that it was his singular duty  
to return to Germany  
and that this duty had been laid on him  
by none other than Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Bonhoeffer's heroic life and death in Germany  
seem to me certain evidence that the Spirit of Christ was working in him,  
and that his struggle against the Nazis  
was in fact his God-given vocation

His story is exceptional, and extraordinary,  
and most likely ours will not be so remarkable;  
for as Bonhoeffer himself admit,  
most of us are not called to martyrdom

But still, each us has his or her own *distinct* calling  
to a life of discipleship

So I ask you to consider this morning:  
how might the Spirit of Christ be at work in you,  
and to what might he be calling you?

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<sup>2</sup>quoted in Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (New York: Oxford, 1999), 297

<sup>3</sup>see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Touchstone, 1953), 129

When I began considering my own call to ordained ministry,  
a few years ago,  
someone gave me a little book, called  
*Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*

It was written by Episcopalians,  
but heavily influenced by the Quaker tradition of “clearness committees,”  
or groups of people who sit together,  
in silence and prayer,  
and help each other listen for the call of God in their own lives

Quakers—like Episcopalians—are big on the word “discernment”  
which, I’ve recently learned,  
comes from the Latin word “discernere”  
which means “to separate” or “sort out.”<sup>4</sup>

[I should warn you all I am studying Latin this semester,  
so you may be getting more Latin fun facts from your seminarian  
than you ever bargained for...]

Anyway, discernment is about “sifting through” our experiences,  
trying to identify the spirit at work in our lives  
—whether it is the Spirit of Christ, or not.

The Spirit of Christ is known to sometimes leaves signs,  
such as those Paul listed in his letters;  
for instance: a sense of peace and joy,  
a feeling of great love for, and generosity toward, humanity,  
and a patience or gentleness of spirit.

And the Quakers suggest others as well—for instance:  
“a certain restlessness” or “a dissatisfaction with things as they are,”  
or “a sense of longing, yearning, or wondering,”  
“a feeling of being at a crossroads,”  
“a sense that something is happening in one’s life,”  
or “that one is wrestling with... [a] decision.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>*Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1991), 23

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid*, 11

Of course, none of these “signs”  
should be taken as hard and fast rules  
that the Spirit is definitely at work in us

One story I read of the early Quakers has confirmed this for me:  
Apparently, *some* Quakers used to believe  
that God's call was always contrary to their own will.

And they used this rule, called “cross to the will,”  
to determine what God was calling them to do.

So, naturally, they decided,  
that God was calling them to walk naked in the streets—  
because this was what they least of all wanted to do!<sup>6</sup>

Now *I think* this story—which is actually true—  
shows that we should be suspicious of any hard and fast rules  
for discerning the call of God—  
unless we want to end up walking around  
naked in the streets of Georgetown.

But still, I invite you to consider this morning,  
what might be the signs of the Spirit in your own life—  
signs that Christ is at work in you,  
calling you to deepen your commitment to him

And I pray that you may have the courage to leave behind  
whatever stands between you and Christ  
and to follow him wherever he may lead. AMEN.

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<sup>6</sup>*Ibid*, 24