

FROM BEAR CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
A Birthday for Agnes

David Orendorff Mark 1:14-20 January 22, 2006

Our Scripture today is a “call” story. Jesus calls four men to follow him in the faith. It is the first such story in the Gospel according to Mark. I like it because Mark doesn't waste a lot of time in theory, he just pretty much lays it out in a bare boned manner and we the reader are left to take it or leave it.

Mark 1:14-20

As I read, prayed and meditated on this scripture, I made four observations: 1) Jesus calls ordinary folks; 2) the call is to trust God with the whole of a person's life; 3) the call asks for an immediate response; 4) those who respond must leave life as they know it and take up new lives of which they know very little.

These first called disciples are ordinary folk. They probably have moderate reading skills, if any. They earn their living by manual labor. They own and operate small businesses that probably eke out a marginal existence. They are only as wealthy as the day's results. They are not great scholars, great leaders, great kings, or great anything. They are just every day, common and ordinary folks. Yet, in hearing Jesus' call to love God, neighbor and self, greatness finds them and Christianity is born.

Again and again, we are shown that Jesus has a passion for plain folk, folk with real lives and hard lives. He hung out with fishers, tax collectors, lepers, even thieves and prostitutes. His love was particularly partial for the common, broken, outcast, and ill.

Jesus' love called to each of these for a response, to be loved in return and to follow in faith. And all those who experienced this love and made it their own awoke to a new world of compassion and justice. Lovers and followers of Jesus leave their nets and their families for the way of Jesus and life is never again the same.

So it is with Simon, Andrew, James and John who leave all they have known and follow; and so too it is for Mary of Magdala, the sisters Mary and Martha with their brother Lazarus. Through the ages lovers of Jesus have followed with faith. I have a few of their stories to tell you.

Cuthbert is one of my favorites. Cuthbert was an ordinary shepherd, a nobody, a slave in the low lands of Scotland in the 7th century. One night Cuthbert had a dream that changed his life. He saw

in his dream Aidan, the prior of Melrose Abbey, ascending into heavenly glory. Moved by the vision, Cuthbert said yes to Christ and went to Melrose, met Aidan, and became a monk. Shortly before his death, Aidan named Cuthbert as his successor. Cuthbert became much loved for his gentleness and compassion. He was a lover of animals as well as people and stories abound of his praying with otters in the North Sea. Later, he was named the Celtic Christian Bishop of all Northumbria, the borderlands between Scotland and England. But in his own mind, Cuthbert was always the simple shepherd who wanted to love God and love his neighbor as himself. God loves the ordinary and those who will give their lives to this love are made, in their own way, great.

Five centuries later Cuthbert's story is continued in Francis of Assisi. At first look there was no greatness in Francis. He was the somewhat selfish and simple son of a cloth merchant. In youth he had aspired to be a glorious soldier and failed. Then Francis heard a wooden cross with a picture of Jesus, hanging in a run down chapel, speak to him and say "Rebuild my church." This was his call from Jesus to trust God and so Francis said yes and began to rebuild the little chapel of San Damiano.

Needing money for the work he went into his father's cloth shop and sold cloth at a great bargain, keeping the money for God's project. Francis' father was rightly angry and took Francis before the local Bishop seeking recompense. The Bishop ordered Francis to repay his father. Francis gave his father all the money he had and then stripped off the clothes he was wearing, gave them to his father, and left Assisi nude.

Francis became a little monk for Jesus. He went to northern Italy and studied in a monastery founded by a student of Cuthbert's (it is a small world). As Francis began to live and teach the simple life of Jesus he became known as a fool for Jesus, which was just fine with him.

Others gathered to Jesus' fool. There was Bernard, Petro and Claire. In a simple life of trusting that God cared for them as God cared for the birds, they found an infectious joy which we know and celebrate to this day. Jesus takes those who say yes to his call, the ordinary folks of life and makes the extraordinary.

Jesus message of God's love for plain folk is a message that defies

what seems reasonable. Common wisdom advises that if you want to do something great, start with greatness; or said inversely, "Garbage in garbage out." But Jesus comes to plain folk and says that it is about them that God cares. If they will only trust God to be near to them and say yes to God in the simplicity of their day, in the commonness of their life, they will be content and know joy. If the ordinary folk will trust in God's love for them God will do great things in them.

Travel forward another eight centuries. Tony Campolo, an admirer of St. Francis and a follower of Jesus was traveling in Hawaii, but his internal clock was set for the east coast where he lived. So at three in the morning, unable to sleep, he found his way to a small, all night diner.

The only other customers were a group of prostitutes who had finished for the night, one of them (Agnes) mentioned that tomorrow was her birthday, and that she had never in her life had a birthday party.

After they left, Tony found out from Harry, the guy behind the counter, that these prostitutes came each night to the diner. Tony asked if he could come back the next night and throw a party. Harry said okay, but only on the condition that his wife does the cooking and he be allowed to bake the cake. What follows is a slightly abridged version of Campolo's story.

At 2:30 the next morning, I (Tony) was back at the diner. I had picked up some crepe-paper decorations at the store and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!"

The woman who did the cooking must have gotten the word out on the street, because by 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes...and me!

At 3:30 the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready, and when they came in we all screamed "Happy Birthday!"

"Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted. Her mouth fell open, and her legs buckled. When we finished singing, her eyes moistened; when the cake was carried out, she started to cry.

Harry gruffly mumbled, "Blow out the candles, Agnes. Come on! If you don't blow out the candles, I'm gonna hafta blow out the candles." Finally, he did. The cutting of the cake took even longer. "Cut the cake, Agnes. We all want some cake."

"Look, Harry, is it OK if I keep the cake a little while; if we don't eat it right away?"

"Sure. If you want to keep it, keep it. Take the cake home if you want."

"Can I?" Then, looking at me: "I just live down the street. I want to take the cake home, OK? I'll be right back."

She carried that cake out the door like it was the Holy Grail. We stood there motionless, a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray?"

Looking back on it now, it seems more than strange for a sociologist to be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning. But then it just felt like the right thing to do. I prayed for Agnes; for her salvation, that her life would be changed. That God would be good to her.

When I finished, Harry leaned over the counter and said with a trace of irritation: "Hey, you never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?"

In one of those moments when just the right words come, I answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning."¹

This was the church Jesus came to create. No one was too good or too bad, too rich or too poor, for a birthday party. Everyone deserved to be loved and to love.

In each of us is a bit of Simon and little Agnes. Each of us, by the circumstances of our lives, have been simple fishermen and prostitutes, if not in body, then in deed or thought. We have eked out a living as best we could and we have sold ourselves until we sometimes felt unclean and undeserving. But Jesus says, "Change your mind. God is with you now, loves you, offers you a better way, a better life. Follow me and it will be yours."

All the striving for pain free life, all the hopes of great wealth or worth in the world are left behind. In the midst of depression, or illness, in the storms of broken loves, there is peace. In the woes of being there is compassion, there is harmony; there is goodness, kindness and healing.

¹ quoted from John Ortberg's Love Beyond Reason, (Zondervan Press, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1998), 128-130.

Jesus calls the common among us to love God, and to love neighbor as we love ourselves. Jesus says to plain folk, "Follow me and I will make you lovers of all."

Again and again, in scripture and in life, it is plain folk, who are called to remember the love God has for them. It is the call to both believe and trust that no matter what is happening God is taking care of it. It is to the ordinary among us, doing the things plain folk do to make life work that Jesus comes. It is to the common folks that Jesus calls with words of faith, with words of gentleness, grace and love. It is to us that God says, "I love you and I am with you always." And when we hear the call, and when we give our lives to the love of Jesus, then great things happen among the least of us because God makes it so.

Amen and Shalom.