

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Third Sunday of Lent
March 7, 2010

The Call: Jesus' Vision of the Kingdom

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

One of my son James' chores at home (shared with his sister) is to go out in the backyard once a week and do a little "doggie-clean-up"...
... you know what I mean.

Well, It is not quite so easy with snow on the ground.

Yesterday he was out there for about a minute when he came to the back door and said he was going to need his sunglasses!

How about that sunshine the last few days! Enjoying it? It's really bright out there!

Last week we considered how the spiritual life can be seasonal, moving from harsh cold of winter to the beauty of spring and summer, and how the chill and darkness of winter, makes day like this all the more glorious!

It is true: If I still lived in Georgia or Virginia, I wouldn't be appreciating this sunshine quite as much!

In a similar way, the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius invite a person through four movements, beginning with wintery reflections on sin and evil, in the world at large, and in our own lives.

The goal of the first movement (whether it be in a week during a 30-day retreat, or over a longer period of time, for the "busy-people" format), is to help us feel deep sorrow for our sin and the sin of the world for the broken condition in which the human race exists, but without having us get stuck there.

The progression from the first movement to the second, is one of moving from sorrow to the grateful acceptance of God's forgiveness.

As we deal with these inner movements, Ignatius identifies two spiritual states that arise within us...

Spiritual Desolation is when we move from sorrow into depression and despair; when we are trapped by past sins and present evil, frozen in hopelessness and finally cynicism.

Spiritual Consolation, as Ignatius defines it, is not simply happiness or pleasure, but the inner joy of knowing and feeling that, despite our sin and sadness, God's love is stronger than evil, God's grace is greater than our brokenness,

God's light will not be overcome by the darkness.

Consolation comes when we know and feel
that we are free from past and present failings
in ourselves and in others;
when we find ourselves set free and energized to move on,
to love and to live.

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The question then arises: Free for what? Transformed to what?

As we considered on Ash Wednesday,
this transformation opens us up to face reality
(that sermon is now online, if you missed it).
Our transformation in Christ - you might also call it a conversion to Christ -
does not automatically put us at the destination,
but it puts us on a *path*, opens us to a *journey*.
The followers of Jesus were called followers of "The Way."
That means our new vocation in life to that of *discerning the Way*,
of recognizing the path,
of hearing and responding to the voice of our Lord
calling us toward his kingdom.

Between the first and second weeks of the *Spiritual Exercises*
there comes a meditation named "The Call of the King."
Of course, Ignatius lived in a time of kings, while we live in a time of constitutions.
"King" language is foreign to us,
particularly as Americans whose historical identity is founded on
throwing off a king and establishing a government by and for the people
(supposedly!).
Perhaps we would name this exercise the Call of our Founding Father,
or our Founding Brother, Jesus Christ,
a call to work toward a vision of human life and human society
that reflects the heart and will of God.

The words of that call go something like this.
"It is my will to win over the whole world, to overcome evil with good,
to turn aside hatred with love,
to conquer all the forces of death -
whatever obstacles there are
that block the sharing of life between God and humankind.
Whoever wishes to join me in this mission
must be willing to labor with me,
and so by following me in struggle and suffering
[will] share with me in glory." ⁱ

A Christian missionary to El Salvador who heard and responded to this call once wrote a letter to her young niece living in the United States, in which she beautifully articulates this sense of call:

She wrote:

"I hope you come to find that which gives life a deep meaning for you. Something worth living for - maybe even worth dying for - something that energizes you, enthuses you, enables you to keep moving ahead. I can't tell you what it might be. That's for you to find, to choose, to love."

The missionaries name was Ita Ford, and she was serving in El Salvador during 1980 at the beginning of the Salvadoran Civil War.

The armed forces labeled Ita and her fellow missionaries as subversives because of their work among the refugees of the war.

Three days after she wrote the letter to her niece, she and three companions were captured, tortured, and killed by Salvadoran government forces.ⁱⁱ Ita had found something worth living for - even worth dying for.

The Call of Christ is not necessarily to dangerous missionary service, but can be to all sorts of things, many forms of service.

As Ita wrote to her niece, "I can't tell you what it might be. That's for you to find, to choose, to love."

You might expect such a call to cause a person great anxiety, but Ita Ford seemed to write from a place of peace.

This is the nature of the Call, and will help us recognize it: When the call truly comes from Christ, it will come as a form of consolation, setting you free from your past sins and present chains, and opening you to a more generous way of life.

The *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius are not intended to conjure up this call.

The goal is not to hear the call *during* the exercises, necessarily, as if we can make it happen when we are ready.

The goal is *to make us ready when it happens*.

To prepare us and give us willing hearts when the call comes.

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Another way of understanding The Call is this:

The essential transformation of life in the Christian faith is from selfishness to love.

This transformation happens uniquely for each person,
never in quite the same way:
some are younger, others older;
some find the change dramatic, others barely perceptible;
some sudden, others in stages.

Always, though, the transformation is accompanied by a struggle.
There is just no way to change, truly change, apart from a struggle.
It is a matter of dying to the old nature within us,
and being born again into the new nature.
Have you ever known of a birth that happened apart from struggle?
Even with our best anesthesia, birthing is a struggle.

I have a good friend who is serving in a particularly challenging setting.
Jay's congregation has suffered several significant traumas in their recent past,
and there is still sometimes an air of suspicion and criticism
that infiltrates their common life.

Jay often says that as soon as God will let him
he'll get out of the ministry and spend the rest of his days
living in the woods and going fishing.

But for now, he knows he is serving where God wants him.
He sees signs of hope that the community is being transformed.
He is learning to delve deeply into relationships with his people,
and to let them vent their anger on him,
as he guides them back to a place of health and peace.

Jay is perhaps the most capable pastor I know, and I know a lot of them.
Often ministry doesn't feel good to him.

There is as much pain for my friend as pleasure.
But he still hears the call to be doing what he's doing,
and he is willing to go on with his Lord.

From time to time, when he sees the fruit that is born of his willing service,
a new attitude in a parishioner, a fresh openness in the leadership,
Jay experiences a fullness of heart that reassures him
that he is meant to be right where he is, for now.

"Conversion [to Christ] is a process of self-transcendence.
From being turned in upon ourselves, we open up to our neighbor.
Having sought what was merely self-satisfying and comforting,
we now seek what is true and good."ⁱⁱⁱ

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Today's scripture readings portray a vision of the Kingdom of God.
Not just a vision of what comes after this life,
but a vision of the earthly life toward which Christ calls us to walk and to work.

Isaiah's vision is of glorious abundance, well-being, nourishment for all,
with ever person invited to the feast, welcomed to share in the kingdom blessing.
Still, this new order is not imposed with laws and regulations,
with economic or military pressure to force us into line.

Rather, it comes as a simple but urgent invitation.

*Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.*

And Jesus reminds us, with his parable of the fig tree,
that it is possible also to close doors of opportunity,
possible to make the wrong choices all your life,
possible to consistently ignore the call,
and ultimately to live a tragic life.

Hitler, Stalin, Saddam & Osama
there are others you could name today on whom the jury is still out,
and still others less notorious,
who consistently choose to turn away,
whose life hangs in the balance
...including ourselves.

Like the fig tree, we have been watered, manured, and mulched -
we have been given every opportunity to bear fruit for the kingdom.
But life is short - and the temptation to squander it on trivial pursuits,
on pleasures and leisures that matter only to ourselves,
well, that is the particular idol of our culture.

But as long as we are alive there is freedom,
there are doors to be opened,
there are choices to be made,
and there is something profound in your life that is worth living for.
The time to respond is now.

ⁱ Dean Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times: New Perspectives on the Transformational Wisdom of Ignatius of Loyola* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2004) p. 60.

ⁱⁱ Brackley, p. 58

ⁱⁱⁱ Brackley, p. 42