

# Called

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.  
The Community Church of Sebastopol  
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## **Luke 10: 1-11; 16-20**

Like you, I am here this morning because I was called. The Christian life is never one of our own choosing. We are summoned to this faith. Being disciples of Jesus Christ was God's idea before it was ours. In some way or another, you are here this morning, I am here this morning, because God found a way to find us, to call us into the church, into discipleship. In the words of former United Methodist Bishop, William Willimon, "It's a demanding, narrow way to walk, living one's life in obedience to Jesus. But it's also a great way to go. Few things are more exciting than to have your little life commandeered by Jesus, propelling you out of yourself and into ministry...Every follower of Jesus Christ, clergy or not, is sent...is called."

A retired pastor shares this story from his childhood. "At the age of ten, I was minding my own business in Miss McDaniel's sixth grade class, copying words off the blackboard, when I got the call: 'Mr. Harrelson says he wants to see you. Go to his office...now!' Mr. Harrelson was our intimidating, ancient principal. Shaking with trepidation, I trudged toward his office. As I passed an open door, a classmate would look out at me with pity and thanksgiving – thankful that it was I and not he who had been summoned by the Principal. Ascending the gallows, I went over in my mind all the possible misunderstandings that could have led to the portentous summons. I was only a distant witness to the rock thrown through the gym window – I had nothing to do with it!

"Once I was in his office, the principal said to me, 'Listen clearly. I want you to go down Tindal Street two blocks, turn left, go two more blocks to number fifteen. I want you to deliver a message to Jimmy Spain's mother. Tell her that if he is not in school by this afternoon I'm reporting her to the police for truancy.'

"I thought, 'Oh no, God help me!' Jimmy Spain was the toughest kid in school, a sixth grader who should have been in eighth. And what was 'truency?'"

"Pondering these thoughts in my heart, I journeyed down Tindal, bidding farewell to the safety of the schoolyard, turned left and walked two more blocks into a tough part of town. Number 15 was a small house with peeling paint and a disordered yard...just the sort of rough-looking house you would expect Jimmy Spain to live in. But there was a big blue Buick parked in front, and as I approached the door of the house, a man emerged, adjusting his tie and putting on his coat. I thought it might be Jimmy's Dad – everybody at school said that Jimmy was so mean because he didn't have a Dad – but the man just laughed at me, got into his car and drove away. It was a few years later that someone whispered to me the word for what Jimmy's mother did for a living.

I stepped up onto the rotten porch and knocked on the broken screen door. My heart sank when it was opened by none other than Jimmy Spain. But before he could say anything, the door was pulled open more widely by a woman in a faded blue, terry cloth bathrobe, who looked down at me, over Jimmy's shoulder. 'What do you want?' she asked in a threatening tone.

" 'Uhh, I'm from the school. The Principal sent me to....' "

" 'The Principal! What does that old man want?' "

" "Uhh, he sent me to say that, well, you see everyone misses Jimmy and wishes he was in school today.' "

" 'What?' she sneered, pulling Jimmy toward her just a bit.

"Jimmy, the feared thug who could beat up any kid at school and who had done so on multiple occasions, peered out at me in wonderment. Suddenly this tough kid, feared by all, looked small, embarrassed, clutched by his mother's protective arm.

" 'Well, you tell that old man it's none of his business what I do with James. James, do you want to go to that old school today or not?' "

"Jimmy looked at her, looked at me, and wordlessly nodded. 'Well then, go get your stuff and take that dollar off the dresser to buy lunch. I ain't got nothing here.' "

"In a flash he was away and back. His mother stood at the door and after making the unimaginable gesture of giving Jimmy a peck on the cheek, stood staring at us as we walked off the porch and down the street. As we walked back to school we said not a word to each other. We walked up the steps to the school, and turned to the Principal's office where I handed him off to the secretary. For the first time in my experience, he seemed, not at all mean and threatening. As the secretary led him toward

the Principal's office, Jimmy turned and looked at me with a look of, I don't know, maybe regret, maybe embarrassment, but it could have also been gratitude.

"That evening, when I narrated my day to my mother, she said, 'That is the most outrageous thing I have ever heard! Sending a young child out in the middle of the day to fetch a truant student. Mr. Harrelson ought to have his head examined. Don't you ever let anyone put you in that position again. Sending a child...!'"

"But I knew that my mother was wrong. That day was the best day of my whole time at Donaldson Elementary and was really preparation for the rest of my life. It was my first experience of a God who thinks nothing of commandeering ordinary folk and giving them outrageous assignments. That day, walking down Tindal Avenue, it was as if God said to me, 'You go down Tindal two blocks and turn left, go two more blocks, number fifteen...I need a message delivered.'"

Clearly this story is from another time, another era. That principal would lose his job if he did that today. But rather than focusing on the principal's questionable judgment, I want us to think about the reaction of our storyteller, his sense, which he never lost, of having answered a call. And I want us to reflect on ourselves as people who have been called. We all know about the call of the twelve disciples, but what happens when we get to Luke 10? Jesus calls and sends out 70 more – sends them to every town and place where he intends to go. And why? Because, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few..." He needs some help. If people are going to hear and be drawn to the Good News of the Gospel, he knows he will not be able to do it by himself. So he calls and he sends. Says Willimon, "This is the way Christ does business. This is the way God gets the world that God wants...by sending people out. There is something about Jesus that makes him call people." The whole idea of mission means that you are doing what you are doing where you are. It might be in Indiana on an adult mission trip – the trip many of us just returned from. Or it might be on the street where you live. But each day, doing what you are doing where you are, you are called, in even the most ordinary of tasks. That's mission.

When Archbishop Desmond Tutu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his tireless nonviolent struggle against apartheid in South Africa, he was asked to recall some formative experience of his life, something that shaped him into the man he became. He replied, "One incident comes to mind immediately. When I was a young child, I saw a white man tip his hat to a black woman. Please understand that such a gesture was completely unheard of in my country. The white man was an Episcopal bishop and the black woman was my mother." Reflecting on this story, UCC pastor, Martin Copenhaver writes, "Even a small fragile gesture can take on grand dimensions when it is offered in love. Our own efforts may be small, but through them the largest of all realities – the love of God – can be communicated. A mere tip of the hat can offer hope and change a life." God works amazing wonders by sending. And we are the ones who are sent. Yes, us, you and me, individuals, families, friends, young, old, male, female, gay, straight, all called to this community, where, linked together by the Spirit of Christ, we collaborate for the common good. Maybe I'm being hopelessly naïve here, but I sincerely believe that we could make a difference, a huge difference, if we could see ourselves this way – as the ones who have been called, commandeered by Christ, to, in even the most ordinary of encounters, bring his Light and Hope to a weary world. For this is how our world will finally be transformed, not from the top down, but from the bottom up.

A young pastor was asked to describe an experience that made her think, "This is what church is all about." She answered, "Watching our church family prepare for the funeral of a sweet eight-year-old girl. I will never forget it. The parents decided to entrust the preparation of the body and the burial itself to members of our church community. The church family received this charge as a gift and a privilege.

"The girl passed away at home. After the proper authorities came and left, a medical doctor from our church rushed over to examine the child. There was nothing clinical or sterile about her approach. She handled the body with the gentleness of a mother examining her newborn child for the first time.

"The child's body was not prepared by a funeral home. Instead, women from the church gathered at the house and prayed over her and bathed her. They dressed her in a favorite dress and her beloved red cowboy boots. And the casket wasn't chosen out of a catalog. A carpenter from our church built her a simple pine box. This was later decorated by the children of the church and the girl's classmates. Their pictures and well wishes were the most beautiful adornment I had ever seen. On the day we celebrated the child's service of death and resurrection, I stood in amazement, looking at the gathered community and at their hands – holy hands – used for touching life and death and life more abundantly."

Ours is a Savior who works wonders – daily miracles – by calling and sending; by inviting us to join in and thereby be changed into something more.