

## All Call

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Acts 10:34-43

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I don't know how this will come across...maybe it will make you feel better...but I would feel much more comfortable and stable and inoculated from the presence of God if you just took a nap during the sermon or played on your phone or got your list ready for the week or drifted off into a trance. What unnerves me, shocks me, and scares me a little bit, is when I hear these words, 'I listened to what you said during the sermon, and so I did this.' No, no, no. Don't take my preaching seriously. It's just a sermon. Don't let it affect your life or cause you to do something drastic. Let's just play church. There's something safer about just thinking of a sermon as religious hallmark card or positive affirmation or a religious pick me up, but don't actually take it to heart. I don't want to have that responsibility, that burden on my shoulders, that you choose to do something, live a certain way, or tried to pick up your cross and follow Jesus Christ because of something I or Sarah allegedly said in a sermon. That's too much pressure. That's too disruptive. That's too serious. Just tell me it was nice and move on with your life as if nothing is different. Just pat me on the head and tell me to try again next time. But I don't want the responsibility of you taking any of this too seriously, I don't want the burden of you going out into the world because of something you may have heard at church and doing something Christlike. I don't want to admit that there might be more than just us sitting here in worship and that power of the Spirit might do things to us and send us from this place with deeper conviction, bold new ideas, and a stronger will to follow Jesus Christ in this world. It would make me feel better, more comfortable, and at ease if we just kept what happens here to ourselves. Kind of like Las Vegas. What happens here stays here ...just a private matter. No long-term damage. No life-changes. Nothing too serious. Just some religious sentiment, some spiritual cotton candy, something that won't ask much from us or expect much out of us.

In the concentration camp at Buchenwald during World War II, among the 20,000 prisoners there was a Reformed Presbyterian pastor from the Rhineland, named Paul Schneider who was a thorn in the side of the Nazi regime and was eventually set to the prison camp for his unwillingness to back away from his pastoral conscience in his service to the congregations he served. In the prison assembly, whenever the Nazi anthem was played, Schneider refused to remove his cap and was beaten and set to solitary confinement for his resistance and conscientious objection. Even holed up there, Schneider would call out words of Scripture to fellow prisoners, especially mornings and evenings during roll call. One particular prisoner stood on the roll call square 'all alone, at the end of his rope, firmly resolved to walk to the electric fence that night and bring to an end his wretched existence. Then over the square he heard a loud clear voice that over

20,000 others could also hear. It was Paul's Schneider's voice,' calling out from the window of his bunker cell, 'Jesus Christ says I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.' Not much more could be proclaimed before the voice was silenced by the blows of the prison guard. But the destitute prisoner had a chance of heart, recounting, 'He saved me by his voice because from that point on I knew that he was with me.' He continued to press on and made it out of the camp, even though the voice of the one who rescued him, never left the camp and later died there.<sup>1</sup>

It was just a sermon, some scripture, and some words of encouragement. Don't let it affect your life or cause you to do something drastic. Let's just play church, but don't actually take it to heart. Or maybe not. Sometimes Jesus unleashes unintended consequences. Sometimes the Holy Spirit can take our broken words and do things with them we never asked or imagined. Sometimes God can use us in ways that make us uncomfortable, uneasy, moving us into a way of life far beyond what we would have intended for ourselves. Our scripture lesson today is one of those sermons. Preached by Peter to Gentiles and calling them and saying things to them that I doubt very much he would have ever believed he would have said at an earlier point in his life. Say what you will about the resurrection stories, but they are far from settled matters about what is going to happen now that Jesus has been raised from the dead. Reading back through the accounts I would not blame you if you concluded that nothing much more was going to come of it. In Mark, Peter and the disciples hear the women's preaching, go to the tomb and see for themselves, and then kind of go back to life as normal. They return home. No life-change. No immediate plan is implemented. They don't want a new normal, they just try to head back into the old normal. In John, they hide. They lock themselves away. They are far from ready to deal with what Jesus' death and resurrection might mean for them and their lives. Lock the door and keep your head down. So, one would not be surprised to find Peter years after all of this to be back on the Sea of Galilee on a new fishing trawler or returning to his original vocation and just trying to remove Jesus and the life he was calling him to out of his mind.

Don't take Jesus preaching too seriously, just compartmentalize it from the rest of his life. Don't take the call to discipleship to be something that would continue to affect him, just see it as a passing fancy. So, to find Peter here in Acts is a little bit jarring and then to see that he is not only back in the game so to speak, but that he is preaching and being used by God to preach specifically to Gentiles and welcome them into God's household is almost beyond the pale. We all live with some weird nostalgia and think that the early days of Christianity were one triumph after another and everyone got along and sang

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<sup>1</sup> Werner Krusche, sermon May 31, 1984, Ascension of Christ in the Gemarker Church in Wuppertal-Barmen; a service in memory of the Theological Declaration of Barmen, 1934).

kumbaya but as communities of Christians were forming throughout the ancient near East and Mediterranean, the controversies were almost immediate...is Jesus' message and call to discipleship just for members of the Jewish community or also for Gentiles and does a Gentile have to take up the customs of the ancestors to become a disciple or simply belief in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and promise to try and follow? We are all familiar with Paul's conversion account in the prior chapter of Acts on the road to Damascus, when a anti-Christian persecutor suddenly is visited by Jesus Christ and is used to spread Christianity throughout the Mediterranean, but our lesson in chapter ten reveals an equally radically converted Peter, whose eyes are opened to see that 'God shows no partiality' or favoritism to any one nation, group, or people, and right after Peter preaches this sermon, the Spirit of God falls on these Gentiles and they praise God and are baptized and incorporated into the community of Christ's disciples.

There is no partiality to God's grace....and God is able and willing to call upon human beings from every race, nation, and tribe, to reflect the light of Jesus Christ. Missionary, bishop, and theologian of mission, Lesslie Newbigin even reminds us that 'there is something deeply wrong when Christians imagine that loyalty to Jesus requires them to belittle the manifest presence of the light in the lives of men and women who do not acknowledge him, to seek out points of weakness, to ferret out sins and deceptions as a means of commending the gospel. If we love the light and walk in the light we will also rejoice in the light wherever we find it—even the smallest gleams of it in the surrounding darkness.'<sup>2</sup> That pastor in that concentration camp really believed that the light of Jesus Christ shines in every darkness and that the darkness has no mastery over it, and what was also implied in that witness was that, in Newbigin's words, 'the presence of Jesus are not confined within the area where is acknowledged,' but in every corner and crevice of the created world.<sup>3</sup> And it means that what happens here, even what is said here, as scary and unsettling and uneasy as that prospect might be, does not stay here, but is meant to go into every corner and crevice in this world and will inevitably take on a life of its own.

In our service today, we will do something that as far as I know, does not occur in any other Christian community. We will ordain and install elders. Our parents in the Reformed tradition did not believe God only called clergy or reserved ordination to the clerical office, but that God also called, equipped, and set aside members of the community who were businesspeople, teachers, parents who work inside the home, retirees, lawyers, butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers, who also had responsibilities in the life of the church alongside those called to teach and preach.

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<sup>2</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 175.

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