

They Cast Their Nets

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Matthew 4:12-23

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In a recent theological piece in the *Presbyterian Outlook*, Cindy Rigby who teaches theology at Austin Seminary quoted the Latin inscription that is etched into the stone entrance in one of the student housing complexes on that campus. The sign reads (apologies to the Latin experts): 'da nobis praedicatores non odiosis.' In English: 'send us preachers who are not boring.'¹ Two hymnals ago, the red 'The Hymnbook,' published in 1955, included a hymn written by Greenville, Mississippi native William Alexander Percy entitled 'They Cast Their Nets in Galilee.' I won't inflict my singing on you, but the first verses of the hymn go like this: 'they cast their nets in Galilee, Just off the hills of brown; such happy simple fisherfolk, before the Lord came down.' Next verse: 'Contented, peaceful fishermen, before they ever knew, the peace of God that filled their hearts, brimful and broke them, too.' Last verse I promise: 'Young John who trimmed the flapping sail, homeless, in Patmos died. Peter, who hauled the teeming net, head down was crucified.' The hymn starts off as almost a simple children's song, but quickly descends into some pretty deep waters, describing a cost of discipleship that is far from boring or domesticated or costless. The hymn also serves as a pretty apt description of our scripture lesson from Matthew and the call of the disciples who were called to a new way of life, a way of life that left the stability of their work, the comfort of family, and the familiarity of home.

This past summer the novelist and Christian writer Frederick Buechner died and in the aftermath there were a number of tributes and biographical pieces published in his memory. One detail of particular interest was that in his twenties Buechner had already published a novel and was making a name for himself as an up and coming New York literati, but in spite of his early success, he was adrift and found himself in personal crisis. He water wrote: 'I was twenty-seven, living alone in New York trying with no success to start a novel and in love with a girl who was not in love with me.' For one reason or another, Buechner found himself wandering into Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church where he heard a sermon by then pastor George Buttrick, 'contrasting the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II with the coronation of Christ in the faith of believers. Elizabeth was crowned with much pomp and circumstance and pageantry,' the preacher remarked, but 'Jesus was crowned among 'confession and tears and laughter.' Buechner remarked: 'At the phrase *great laughter*, for reasons that I have never satisfactorily understood, the great

¹ Cynthia Rigby, 'Re-enchanted doctrine: Listening to God's Word,' in *The Presbyterian Outlook* (January 2023), 32-33.

wall of China crumbled, and Atlantis rose up out of the sea, and on Madison Avenue, at 73rd Street, tears leapt from eyes as though I had been struck across the face.' And it was after this moment in Buechner's life, that he 'turned his enormous literary gifts to the task of writing explicitly out of his Christian faith.'² He probably did not realize it all at once, but he heard the voice of Christ calling and helping him to see how he could use his God-given gifts in service to Christ's call of discipleship, and he took off in that direction and never looked back. I am not sure if he ever achieved the kind of notoriety or popular stardom as a novelist if he had aimed for a broader audience, but he did a lot of fishing for people and helped his fellow travelers make sense of the world they were living in, and helped them to see the presence of God alive in this world.

On the west entrance to Westminster Abbey, the one in which queens and kings process for coronations and royal weddings and in which recently Queen Elizabeth's coffin was carried under at her funeral service, there are a series of carved stone statuettes in the door. On first glance they look medieval and like they have been there for ages, but in fact, upon further examination, they are all twentieth century figures that were commissioned in 1995 and are martyrs of the faith drawn from every continent and many Christian denominations. Included above that Great West door are Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Oscar Romero a Catholic bishop who was assassinated in El Salvador, Christians from South Africa and Russia and Pakistan and China who were all persecuted and in some cases killed for trying to follow Jesus Christ in the context and circumstances of their own country. Also on that wall is Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was executed by the Nazis in Flossenberg concentration camp just dies before liberation by the Allies. What strikes me in gazing up at those figures above the Great West door is that they are not some patron who paid Westminster Abbey a lot of money to put their patriarch above the door, they are not dedicated to kings and queens or even great parliamentarians of Great Britain. They are people from all walks of life, all within spitting distance of all of us, who heard Jesus call to 'follow me' and who decided to leave their nets and follow even when it led them into danger. Standing under these statues and gazing up at them, one is grateful to the wisdom of those who saw to it that these figures be commissioned reminding us all that there are consequences and responsibilities to the faith we profess, and of course accompanying that gratitude is also a sense of guilt and internal questioning. How far would I be able to follow in the face of pressure or a hostile environment or a cultural moment. I saw a statistic last week that at the time Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated he had a 75% negativity rating with the American public and 50% of Americans thought he was bad for the country. Today 95% of Americans believe he should be a model of faithful service and witness, and this is the same figure who now resides permanently above the Great West Door at

² Tom Long, 'Frederick Buechner and Homiletical Impressionism,' in *Journal for Preachers* (Lent 2023), 7.

Westminster Abbey. Follow me is not a trivial or inconsequential decision and may lead us to go against the grain and walk to the beat of a different drummer or take a stand that is not always universally admired.

So back to the other thing etched into stone at Austin Seminary, the plea, prayer, declaration, and hope, 'send us preachers who are not boring.' I know you think I am trying to give myself and all preachers an out, but stick with me. If by boring we mean, only send us preachers who are entertaining and charismatic and amusing, but who don't ask much of us, expect much from us, or believe we are called to do much in this world as Christ's disciples, then don't send us those either, they may be worse than boring preachers even if they are highly entertaining and enjoyable. In my first call to ministry, I learned after arrival, that my predecessor had asked an old crusty elder who was not used to being put on the spot, to pray at a session meeting, and he responded: 'that is what we pay you for.' Being the pragmatic and self-preservationist that I am, I decided it would probably be prudent not to take that path and steer clear of asking the old crusty elder or anyone else for that matter, to pray on the spot at a session meeting. The whole episode did make me wonder though, if the way we measure 'boring preachers' might be a bit more subjective or harder to capture, and while certainly we ought to be able to pray with and for you, maybe part of our work should also to prod each other to be better prayers and to see that the call 'to follow me' is falls freshly upon each of us. We Christians are often really good at celebrating call or conversion or our mountaintop experiences. 'Here I am, Lord,' we sing, or we recount our first or our deepest conversion experience or we revisit some holy moment where we felt fully whole and one with God, but hearing and responding to the gospel is just the beginning of it. It's just the beginning of the mess, and Jesus does as much unraveling of us and what we thought we knew along the way as he does redeeming us and putting us back together by grace. Follow me, embarking on discipleship, and receiving Christ's call afresh involves as much unlearning as it does learning. In theologian Darrell Guder's words, as we receive Christ and as Christ enters into our lives and our world, we are also placed in question by him. Every culture and people and church and disciple for that matter, Guder reminds us, 'attempts to fit the person and work of Christ into their patterns of accepted religious practice.'³ Part of our call to discipleship is to resist domesticating Jesus even when it would make life easier and to continue to be hear Christ's call to discipleship anew and again and not to think it only takes one time to answer it but that it is a daily gift to be received and a new daily responsibility that we have to accept. An everyday saint who I had the privilege of burying on the tail end of the pandemic, struggled for many years with Parkinson's, but never let it stop her from pursuing a full life and serving others as a disciple of Jesus Christ. A gifted teacher as well, she like to describe the life of faith as a

³ Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 85.

gift to be received with joy and gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage and perseverance. A gift and a task, that will continually confront us and challenge us to 'greater faithfulness and a more obedient response to God's love.'⁴ In all times in our life, at all places in our world, at all moments of our day, Jesus Christ is beckoning us 'follow me,' and Darrell Guder reminds us that just as the 'Lord's prayer' may be prayed in every language,' Christ's 'call to discipleship may be shaped in every culture and will always be both a blessing and a scandal in that culture—if it is faithful to Christ.'⁵ We get the gift part, but it is gift that never lets us possess it and instead becomes a task that will challenge us, vex us, and call us into question even as it transforms us, loves us, and redeems us.

Please don't send us boring preachers...while that is certainly bad, I can think of something worse...preachers who entertain us but don't help us to see that the call of discipleship was not just for some fisher folk long ago or only for a bunch of hallowed martyrs etched into stone at Westminster Abbey, but that Jesus calls us to follow him here and now, not only as a grace to be received, but a task to be pursued. With courage, with joy, with nerve. Amen.

⁴ Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 85.

⁵ Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 93.