

CALLED TO BE SAINTS
A SERMON ON FIRST CORINTHIANS 1:1-10
LEDAYNE MCLEESE POLASKI
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1 Corinthians 1.1-10

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in God, in speech and knowledge of every kind— just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. God will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by God you were called into the fellowship of God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

When the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church he had founded in Corinth five years earlier, he knew that he was speaking to a wild and motley assortment of people. Lifelong Jews worshiped alongside Gentile converts; prosperous heads of household sat with slaves. They were male and female, rich and poor, powerful and powerless. There are those who had everything they needed and more and “those who ha[d] nothing.” (chapter 11) And to this odd little gathering Paul writes these words. “[You are] called to be saints.” Not just to the circumcised, the rich, the men, the free – but to all he writes, “[You are] called to be saints.”

And if Paul were somehow to speak to this wild and motley assortment of people known as St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church – what do you suppose he would say? I think he’d say to us all – not just the lifelong church goers, the ones

who know the Bible well, the ones who have their act together, the ones who are just naturally “nice” – but to us all “[You are] called to be saints.”

Now if you are sitting there thinking that you somehow missed that call – maybe forgot that you had your cell phone set to vibrate and neglected to check your voice mail – it may be that you need to reconsider what the call of God actually sounds like.

I want to take you on a little trip – through my life. Not because my life is any more revealing or interesting than anyone else’s but just because it is the one I know best.

Somewhere buried at my house is a copy of a book published when I was in high school that lists my future ambition to attend the University of Missouri and major in journalism. It was an accurate reflection of what I hoped and planned to do when I was a high school junior – So, why did I end up a few years later at a small Baptist college majoring in psychology because I figured I’d get enough religion classes in seminary?

I grew up in a military family. My stepdad (the man with whom I grew up) was a former Marine turned police officer. Three of my brothers have served in the US armed forces. My mom and dad’s lives now revolve around the American Legion. I never questioned any of that as a youngster. So, how did I end up working for the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America?

It struck me a few years ago when my family drove from North Carolina to Utah for the annual BPFNA summer conference, that while my then 8-year-old daughter had been to many US states and even crossed a few national borders – I had by the time I was age been to: South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee. I was from South Carolina, went on an annual summer pilgrimage to Atlanta to see the Braves in their usually pitiful attempt to play baseball, occasionally went up to North Carolina with my grandmother when she went to take advantage of that state’s much lower taxes on tobacco and had once been to Gatlinburg with my aunt and uncle. I was well into high school before I broke out of that four state box. So, how have I come to be someone who has friends quite literally all over the world and travels to Italy, Nicaragua, Cuba, Canada, Mexico?

How on earth did I get here?

Though I struggle to call myself anything remotely like a saint, I know that I am where I am and do what I do because of God's consistent call on my life. But how did I hear that call when it was so far from anything I knew?

Several years ago, I was asked to speak at another BPFNA Partner Congregation and asked to talk about a Baptist peacemaker who was important to me. My first question was, "Does it need to be someone they might have heard of?"

We have this little joke in our office, 'Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King – the rest of us are off the hook.' We revere those men quite rightly. But there is a danger in that reverence. Because most of us know that we will never found religions, nonviolently topple empires, or peacefully reshape nations we are tempted to let ourselves off easy. Because we cannot be them, we don't become ourselves. Because we cannot answer their call, we don't bother to listen for our own. But along with the Apostle Paul, I would insist that we are all "called to be saints." So, how do we hear and answer that call?

The truth is that I know exactly how I heard and answered. And their names are Harry Workman, John Shelley, and Jim Leavell. Unless we have some weird six degrees of separation thing going on, you have never heard of these peacemakers. I have to confess now that Harry isn't a Baptist peacemaker – he's actually a Methodist -- but I have to include him because he is a part of my personal trinity of the people who have made me who I am.

I met Harry Workman when I was in high school – you know, back in the journalism at Missouri days. (Not that there is anything wrong with journalism or that U of M – they just weren't my call.) Harry was a Methodist pastor deeply involved in a program called Salkehatchie Summer Service through which teams of high school students and their adult leaders worked to do basic repairs and improvements on the homes of people living in poverty. To give you an idea of the kind of poverty – during my first year in the program, my team repaired a collapsing porch, patched a leaking tin roof, built an outhouse, and ran in a water line so that the elderly home owner would be able to wash her dishes inside. This was, by the way, in South Carolina. I had learned in Sunday School that there desperately poor people in other places in the world, but I had not realized that they also lived right in my backyard. I was shocked and chagrined but also empowered because I knew that God was using me – even me – to do something about it. It was my very first experience of both the aching need all around me and of God's desire and ability to work through me to lesson that ache. Harry helped me to see all of that, and he did one other amazing thing.

One night when I was pouring my heart out to him about all I was seeing and feeling and learning, he said to me, "I wonder if you've ever thought about being a minister." Well, no, as a matter of fact, I had not. Girls could do that?! Really?!? Growing up Southern Baptist, I had never seen or heard of a woman in ministry, but Harry's question and affirmation opened up a radically new reality to me.

So, it was directly because of Harry that I ended up changing my carefully planned future and enrolling at Furman University. Now that did not get me out of South Carolina – at least not immediately – but it did introduce me to my Baptist peacemakers. My very first term at Furman, I decided to meet a graduation requirement by taking Religion 11 – Introduction to the New Testament. Not knowing any of the professors, I picked the time that was best for me. (I'm not a morning person so I think it was noon.) I doubt that any other random choice in my life has ever had such an impact on me. I thought that I had in the series of little Baptist churches I had attended on and off throughout the years already been introduced to the New Testament. But Dr. John Shelley convinced me otherwise. He was the very first person to mention to me that maybe, just maybe, Jesus had something to say about social justice. Having the lessons of my Salkehatchie experience fresh in my heart and mind, that led me to think that maybe, just maybe, Jesus had something to say about people living in collapsing shacks without water or electricity in the middle of South Carolina. And perhaps the point of the Bible wasn't getting saved and going to heaven but doing something about the shacks. I ended up taking several courses from Dr. Shelley over the years. Not because I needed them for graduation, but because I loved being in his presence and learning some of what he knew so well. I loved him for his kindness, patience, good humor and humility. And I loved him for teaching me about an inclusive and inviting God who longs for justice and abundant life for everyone. I also admired him for protesting (something else I'd never heard of) a self-congratulatory display of military equipment on campus with a sign that read, "Shouldn't we mourn instead?" John Shelley really did introduce me to quite a lot. I am deeply, deeply grateful that he helped me hear the Biblical call to work for peace rooted in justice. He's the reason I knew that the Baptist Peace Fellowship was working to follow Jesus.

Now in addition to the one necessary religion class, Furman had a requirement that every student take an Asian or African-themed course. I don't really remember how it was that I chose to take Cultural History of Japan with Dr. Jim Leavell, but I still vividly recall the first day of that course during which Dr. Leavell told us, "Not only do the Japanese have different answers than we do, they are

asking different questions." Just like my New Testament course, this class rocked my world – my little, tiny, four states before high school, patriotic American world. Studying this ancient culture, we sometimes skipped two and three hundred year periods of time as relatively unimportant – it occurred to me that perhaps my two-century old country was not after all the very center of the known universe. More than that, I began to appreciate that there was deep and lasting wisdom to be gained that I would not be able to find in the familiar contours of home. A few years ago, I went with BPFNA on a Friendship Tour to Nicaragua. It was a life-changing, life-shaping trip –just like almost all of my other trips outside of the US. Sitting in the courtyard of the small courtyard our host group, I took the time to send Dr. Leavell an email of gratitude for helping to make me open to the wider world. 'I don't think I'd be here if it weren't for you, " I wrote.

To whom could you say those words? "I don't think I'd be here if it weren't for you."

You are, just like all those Christians in Corinth, just like all people of faith at all times, called to be a saint! Who have been the people who have helped you to hear your call, helped you to become yourself? Who are they now? Who might even now be speaking a word that will help you to hear God speaking? It may be Jesus, Gandhi, or Martin Luther King – more likely, it is a lesser-known saint, a powerful peacemaker known only to a few. I hope you've listened – I hope you'll continue to listen – because the world desperately needs you to be you, to live out what you were created to do.

John of the Cross once wrote, "God has so ordained things that we grow in faith only through the frail instrumentality of each other." That frail instrumentality has been the one most important, most influential force in my life. Time and again, God has spoken to me through Harry, John, Jim –through my husband and daughter -- even the bus driver or grocery store clerk. God has called, poked, prodded, and cajoled me through the people with whom I share my life. I hope your story is the same.

And there's one more thing – if God calls us through other people, then God also calls other people through us. I want to be clear about what I don't mean – My father once shared with me that his mother told him as a young boy that he was meant to be a preacher, and if he didn't follow that call, then he would never be happy. That thought has haunted him for years, especially in those times when he was unhappy. I wonder sometimes what my grandmother, who

died before I started high school, would have thought about her prophecy skipping a generation. But that's another sermon! I don't think we are meant to tell other people what to do – especially not to tell people what God is telling them to do. But I do think we are meant to be ourselves, to speak our truth, to ask one another good questions, to open up new realities, to affirm what we see in them, to share what we know and who we are and what we do. And in doing so – to help one another to hear and answer God's call to become ourselves. As Evelyn Underhill writes, "We are far from realizing all that human spirits can do for one another -- how truly and really our souls interpenetrate, and how impossible and un-Christian it is to 'keep ourselves to ourselves.'

In his commentary on First Corinthians, Richard Hays reminds us that to rightly understand this letter, we must remember that Paul was writing not to individuals but to a congregation. He is writing, encouraging, and correcting them with the purpose of nurturing them as a community. "His constant goal is to call the Corinthians to understand their corporate existence as a church." (p. 11) We can only live out that to which we are called together.

So: To the church of God that is in New Orleans, Louisiana, at the corner of ??? and ???, to you who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in God. God is faithful; by God you were called into the fellowship of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord because "despite our illusions, none of us is capable of living the life God has called us to alone. We all need someone, some group, some **community** to help us fulfill God's dream for our life. We may be extraordinarily gifted, wealthy, wise, self-sufficient and independent, but in the end, it will not be enough. There will be a day, if there has not been already, when you will come to a point where you cannot stand alone." (from Bill Wilson of the Center for Congregational Health) Go forth to be the saints you are called to be – and go forth knowing that saints do not – must not – stand alone. Let's not keep ourselves to ourselves – let's be good to – and for – one another. Amen.

Sources:

First Corinthians by Richard B. Hays, Interpretation series