



**"The Lord and Life We Share"**  
**Mark 1:14-20**

**January 25, 2009**  
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Two weeks ago I had the chance to visit with our middle daughter Cecily and her husband Mike in Memphis Tennessee. While there only a couple of days, I was given a whirlwind tour – visiting Mud Island; seeing Graceland; going into a Barnes and Noble bookstore in a former theater frequented by Elvis Presley (where the famous phrase *"Elvis has left the building"* was popular); within a span of one hour being in Arkansas, Tennessee, and Mississippi – crossing over the mighty Mississippi twice; and going downtown to the beautiful Peabody Hotel to witness the famous *"Duck Walk"* to the lobby fountain at 11:00 in the morning. *(If you are interested, I can explain after the service!)*

Of great intrigue to me, though, was an advertisement I chanced upon while reading a local newspaper: *"Brand New Jacuzzi – For sale, complete with all the fixtures and plumbing supplies. Will trade for a pick-up truck. Call Willie at this number after 6:00PM."*

Now, while I am not trained in clinical psychology, I suspect that behind those words there is a human life who is going through a major transition! Away with the Jacuzzi and gold chains, the wine coolers and avocado dip. And in with the flannel shirts and baseball caps, the Budweiser and the Chevy half ton!

Such a change, of course, is reflective of the culture in which we are now living. Indeed, our society is rife with these kinds of transformations and lifestyle changes, some of which are directly linked to the economic tsunamis of the last year and others tied to the seismic shifts in the political and personal arenas in recent years. People are exploring the values of becoming vegetarians and vegans, of going on spiritual and meditative retreats, of developing lifestyles with smaller carbon footprints, of working on interpersonal relationships and discovering one's truest self, of learning the wonders and mysteries of the internet and how to handle the vast information reservoir available in seconds, of considering service opportunities in response to President Obama's clarion call, and of making scores of other adjustments to the compass settings of their life journeys.

It is easy, of course, to adopt a somewhat cynical attitude toward such changes as these and others. Some of them are no doubt faddishly superficial,

containing more conformity than true conversion and personal transformation.

But however silly or trivial such changes may appear on the surface, the changes people make in their lives are often signs of a crucial, frequently desperate, sometimes courageous, search. If that is true, then we need to ask what is it that they are searching for? What causes people to contemplate important changes in their day-to-day lives? What motivates them to leave a place of settled circumstances and values, where everything is nailed down and in place, in order to venture off into a new and uncharted region?

We should recognize that some of the shifts people make in their lives are probably rebellions against the boredom they may feel in their bones. They are not really “planned trips” to new destinations that have been researched and investigated. Rather, they are simply tickets on the first bus out of town. In Herb Gardner’s play *A Thousand Clowns*, Murray Burns, who is an open-collared, disorganized, and voluntarily unemployed free spirit, is explaining to Arnold (his disciplined and socially-conventional brother) that it was the fear of numbing boredom which drove him to abandon the traditional 9-to-5 life:

***“Arnold, five months ago I forgot what day it was. I’m on the subway on my way to work, and I didn’t know what day it was ... for a minute it could have been any day ... Arnie, it scared the heck out of me.”***

Another playwright, Arthur Miller, described such malaise this way:  
***“People no longer seem to know why they are alive. Existence is simply a string of near-experiences marked off by periods of stupefying spiritual and psychological stasis, and the good life is basically an amused one.”***

Many people, however, have grown weary of making changes just to alleviate their boredom. They have discovered that the problem with shaking the dust of boredom off their feet and heading out the door to who knows where, is that leaving one place always means arriving at another place that becomes pretty much like the first place. Whatever direction you take out the door, you eventually have to show up somewhere else, and that new place is likely to prove as tedium-filled as the last.

This discloses another reason, I think, why people make important changes in their lives; namely, they seek change not so much to get away from a place of boredom, as they do to find a new place of greater meaning and purpose. This is not the kind of change in which a person simply heads out the door, slamming it on the way out and stomping their feet, but is the kind of change in which a person yearns to become a citizen of a new, richer, more fulfilling and promising land. It’s not a rebellion against boredom. Rather, it is a hunger to discover one’s truest self ... which is a hunger that comes with a certain anguish and confusion about it all. As some of the singers in Bernstein’s *Mass* express it:

***“What I need I don’t have; What I have I don’t own  
What I own I don’t want; What I want, Lord, I don’t know ...  
What I say I don’t feel; What I feel I don’t show  
What I show isn’t real; What is real, Lord – I don’t know ...”***

When life is as confusing and disorienting as a ball bouncing in a wildly spinning Roulette Wheel, we are eager for it to come to rest on a number – any number – as long as it promises some kind of framework for identity and meaning, whether it involves losing ourselves in work or finding ourselves in God.

The difficulty with this kind of change, though, is that when we go looking to “find ourselves,” we often find ourselves alone ... or as Henri Nouwen once observed, ***“We come knocking on the interior door of our selves, and to our dismay we discover that nobody is at home.”*** There is a certain sadness in a culture like ours which bravely trumpets the virtue of inner-directed, risk-taking, self-sufficient people who don’t need anybody else in order to be fully human, but a culture which, at the same time, is full of hurting people who somehow seem caught or trapped in their pursuit of loneliness.

One of the sociologists who authored the book ***Habits of the Heart*** some years ago reported the following interview with a professional woman in her early 30's:

***Q: So what are you responsible for? A: I’m responsible for my acts and for what I do.***

***Q: Does that mean that you’re responsible for others, too? A: No.***

***Q: Are you your sister’s keeper? A: No.***

***Q: Your brother’s keeper? A: No.***

***Q: Are you responsible for your husband? A: I am not. He makes his own decisions. He is his own person.***

It’s a worthy goal, I suppose, to want to ***“be one’s own person.”*** I mean, no one wants to be pushed around, overwhelmed, or controlled by the demands of others. But there is a deeper sense in which none of us finally wants to be our own person. We long to hear the sound of another’s voice summoning us, valuing our life to make a claim on it, being called for or chosen in some way and thereby invited into relationships that are rich and a life that is rewarding.

There is a dread we all feel deep in our hearts that is deeper than the fear of rejection, greater than the anxiety that we will not forge a satisfying self in the grand scheme of things, and that is the fear that we will ultimately be uncalled for. This is the fear that no one will ever turn to us and say, ***“Come with me. I want you by my side. I need you.”*** This is the fear that who we are, and what we say, and what we do does not really matter to anybody else. Like neighborhood children choosing up sides for a game, each desperately worried about being the

last one reluctantly chosen, we make most of the changes in our lives in an effort to make ourselves attractive or desirable enough, to be summoned by another.

In the light of all this, the story of Jesus' passing along the sea, calling Simon and Andrew, James and John, promising to send them forth in order to fish for people, is a moment of sheer wonder and grace. We know very little about the inner life of these men ... whether they were restless or tranquil, bored or satisfied, happy or sad. What is important, though, is not what was going on *in* them, but what happened *to* them. And what happened to them was that they were "called for." It was a call bigger than self, broader than occupation, deeper even than family ties. It was a call from the Son of God himself. They were called for not because they had somehow made themselves desirable or competent or educated. They were called for because it is the very life and nature of God to call his people and to enlist them in his cause. *"Follow me,"* Jesus said, *"and I will send you calling, too."* What happened, of course, was that they made the most profound change a person can possibly make: *"Immediately, they ... followed him."*

There is a moving scene in Jean Anouilh's play *Becket* that speaks to the powerful impact of such a sense of call. The King had appointed Becket, who was his old hunting companion and carousing partner, to be Archbishop, and then he expected Becket to cooperate in a scheme to bring the church under royal control. What the King had not counted on, though, was that Becket would view his ordination as a genuine call ... as a summons to serve *"the honor of God."*

Becket, therefore, refuses to capitulate to the King's plan. The King is astonished and, reminding Becket of their wild days together at the hunts and in the brothels, claims that this new stance of resistance is not like Becket at all. *"Perhaps,"* responds Becket, *"I am no longer like myself."* When the King presses for a reason, Becket describes the sense of call, the feeling that an ultimate claim had been placed on his life, at the time of his ordination:

*"I felt for the first time that I was being entrusted with something, that's all, there in that empty cathedral, that day when you ordered me to take up this burden. I was a man without honor. And suddenly I found it ... the honor of God."*

I felt for the first time that I was being entrusted with something ... something special, something unique, something tailored for me.

*"Follow me,"* said Jesus, *"and I will send you fishing in my name."* That same summons comes to us all. For some of us it will come as a call to leave our nets, our books, our desks, our homes. For others it will come as a call to mend our nets more carefully, read our books more thoroughly, mind our desks more faithfully, live in our homes more lovingly. But in whatever form, it will come and will continue to come, for it is a summons to forsake our being *"our own person"* and to become Christ's. And when we hear it, we can be sure that the One who

loves us best, and cherishes our life most fully, has come near, and that, in the deepest of all ways, we have been called for.

Let us pray: Lord God, who is as near to us as the breath we breathe, remind us each day how you beckon us toward new horizons of the spirit where we discover who we truly are and to whom we really belong, in Jesus Christ. Amen.