



First United Methodist Church - Moweaqua, Illinois

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With A Little Help From My Friend

Mark 1: 14-20

Two country boys, Zeke and Zeb, decided to build a Bungee Jumping tower down in Mexico to see if it would make them some money. After they got it set up, they noticed that the crowds gathered around but no one was buying any tickets. Zeke said to Zeb, "Maybe you should demonstrate it so that they get the idea." After Zeb was strapped on he jumped and fell almost to the ground before springing back. As he came back up Zeke noticed that Zeb's clothes were torn and wondered what that was all about. Zeb went down again and this time when he came back up Zeb was bleeding. Zeke thought "Wow, what's going on here?" Zeb went down a third time and this time when he came back up Zeke noticed that he had blood, contusions, and cuts all over his body. Zeke pulled Zeb in and said "Zeb, what happened." Zeb groaned and said, "I don't know, but what's a piñata?"

Tuesday is Inauguration Day, and I don't know about you but I do not envy the job that Barack Obama has in front of him. In many ways our world is like a huge piñata – our planet is taking one whack after another everywhere you look... Global warming, outrageous weather, huge storms, economic meltdown, wars, disease, famine, drought, the credit crunch, bankruptcies, job loss, not to mention terrorists even pirates...for pity's sake. Some of you have begun to experience the effects of this upheaval first hand... others have only heard about it, and I'm rather afraid, from the looks of things, that this current economic crisis is probably coming soon to a wallet near you. And that doesn't even begin to take into account everything that goes along with this global distress. It is well documented that stress associated with finances can cause physical illness, problems with relationships, depression and loss of self esteem. These are tough times we are facing in our world right now.....and there are very few families who have not or will not be affected.

Just recently, my daughter who works for a television station in North Carolina, called to tell me that everyone in the Gannett Corporation, has to take a week off without pay. Employees will no longer receive extra compensation for working holidays. Several people she works with have been laid off. Jobs have been eliminated... and the possibilities of transferring to another TV station are pretty slim. She works as a photographer and she tells me that she doubts that TV stations will be employing full time photographers for much longer. They are being phased out in favor of back pack journalists...reporters with minicams. Some TV stations are eliminating local news entirely.

Our world is changing. What looked like promising professions not so long ago are suddenly being phased out and that is happening everywhere. Look what happened at Circuit City this week...568 stores closed ...35,000 jobs lost. According to statistics, in the month of December unemployment in this country reached 7.2% the highest it has been in 16 years... 1.9 million people lost their jobs in the last 4 months of the year and to make matters worse, by June it is projected that an additional 1.5 million people will be out of work. As the prophet Jeremiah once said "desolation everywhere!" .

Wow! As Christians how do we deal with this overwhelming bad news? What would God have us to do? What should our response be? Where is our hope? And then I remember a little story I heard a long time ago....

A young woman went to her mother and told her about her life and how things were so hard for her. She did not know how she was going to make it and wanted to give up. She was tired of fighting and struggling. It seemed as one problem was solved, a new one arose.

Her mother took her to the kitchen. She filled three pots with water and placed each on a high fire. Soon the pots came to boil. In the first she placed carrots, in the second she placed eggs, and in the last she placed ground coffee beans. She let them sit and boil, without saying a word. In about 10 minutes she turned off the burners. She fished the carrots out and placed them in a bowl. She pulled the eggs out and placed them in a bowl. Then she ladled the coffee out and placed it in a bowl. Turning to her daughter, she asked, "Tell me, what do you see?"

"Carrots, eggs, and coffee," she replied.

Her mother brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots. She did and noted that they were soft. The mother then asked the daughter to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell, she observed the hard boiled egg. Finally, the mother asked the daughter to sip the coffee. The daughter smiled as she tasted its rich aroma.

The daughter then asked, "What does it mean, mother?"

Her mother explained that each of these objects had faced the same adversity ... boiling water and each reacted differently. The carrot went in strong, hard, and unrelenting. However, after being subjected to the boiling water, it softened and became weak. The egg had been fragile. Its thin outer shell had protected its liquid interior, but after sitting through the boiling water, its inside became hardened. The ground coffee beans were unique, however. After they were in the boiling water, they had changed the water. "Which are you?" she asked her daughter. "When adversity knocks on your door, how do you respond? Are you a carrot, an egg, or a coffee bean?"

Which brings me to today's scripture. It's a scripture that we discuss often The calling of the disciples. However, this year...as we deal with a world that is in a recession... teetering on the brink of chaos...it spoke a little differently to me. Let's look at it again

One day as Jesus was walking along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew fishing with nets, for they were commercial fishermen. Jesus called out to them, "Come, follow me! And I will make you fishermen for the souls of men!" At once they left their nets and went along with him. A little farther up the beach, he saw Zebedee's sons, James and John, in a boat mending their nets. He called them too, and immediately they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and went with him. (LB)

Interesting method of recruiting. No headhunters. No help-wanted ads. No employment agency. He sees them working and says, "Hey, I want you!" and immediately they follow. No papers to fill out, no resumes ...no background checks He just calls and they follow.

Notice that Jesus called his twelve apostles while they were performing the ordinary work they did every day. They were not worshipping in the Temple or praying when Jesus approached them. They were not leading a Bible study or a heated debate on the book of Daniel. They were involved in hard physical manual labor when Jesus asked them to follow him. In other words they had jobs. Jobs that they needed to put bread on the table. Jobs that provided shelter and clothes for their families. Jobs that meant the difference between a comfortable life and the uncertainties of following an itinerant preacher all around Palestine. And yet, when Jesus calls these

men, each man readily abandons their jobs and their former lives and begins to follow Jesus on a path that would take them on a spectacular journey that would re-shape not just their lives but the world as well.

Have you ever put yourself in their place? Our jobs are very important to us. Even if we do not like them, we are kind of fond of the benefits they bring. Paychecks are handy things to have especially when the bills come around. . How does one do that...give up everything to spend the rest of your life wandering from place to place, often the object of scorn and ridicule, suspecting all along that you might end up dying a martyr's death for your decision . . .for no pay?

My daughter is a hard worker, but she doesn't like her job. It's hard work carrying those big heavy TV cameras around. And it's not just the cameras, it's the sound equipment, the lighting and all the cables. And she has to do this work in all kinds of difficult circumstances. If a hurricane is coming...she knows she's going to be out there in wind, rain and weather filming the storm. And the same goes for ice storms and blizzards. She hates the extreme heat even more than the cold... Of course, her job has taken her to a lot of interesting places, and she's seen a lot of famous people up close... presidents, famous actors, musicians, athletes, even Billie Graham. Once she covered a NASCAR race from the pits and interviewed the drivers. She's met Barak and Michelle Obama more than once and has even had personal interviews with them. As her mother, I going to brag a little and say, she is good at what she does. Her work has received recognition, awards and even an Emmy nomination.. But as far as my daughter is concerned if they ever stop paying her ...she'd be out of that station in a heartbeat. That's because what she does at the TV station is not a calling.... It's a job that pays the bills.

By the same token a few years ago Sonnet volunteered to do some promotional filming for the Girl Scouts. She worked in the rain, and she worked in the snow, and she hauled cables and set up lights, spent long hours editing on her computer, sometimes into the wee hours of the morning....and she didn't get paid one dime...in fact she ended paying for some of the project out of her own pocket. But despite all of that she loved every minute of what she was doing. Isn't that strange? It was the same work but it was a different purpose...and that made all the difference. You see Sonnet believes in the Girl Scouts and the difference it makes in young girls lives, and she wanted to tell that story and so she became passionate about her work...she followed her calling and by doing so it did more than put bread on the table...it fed her soul..

Which just goes to show you there is a difference. There is a difference between our jobs and our callings. The disciples could have continued to fish or collect taxes and they would have lived difficult but safe lives. And in the time they would have died and been forgotten just like all the other fisherman and tax collectors who have ever walked the earth over the centuries. But these fisherman and tax collectors were different because when they met Jesus they found something that was worth devoting their whole lives to. Of course, that didn't mean that everything they did with Jesus was a cake walk either. Along with Jesus they faced the elements, the might of the Roman empire, and they died terrible painful deaths. But today we still lift them up as an example to be followed. Why? Because what they found on that morning alongside the sea side of Galilee is something that each of us needs to find in our lives as well. They found someone to believe in, they found someone who gave them hope and a reason for living. They answered the calling of Jesus Christ and immediately their souls resonated with his mission and his message of God's love, healing and forgiveness. Later, despite all the hardships and sacrifices that they faced because of their faithfulness to that calling, the disciples would testify

that every pain, every blister, every whipping, every sacrifice, every hardship was worth it because of the immeasurable joy of knowing Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Which brings me back to where we began. Times are hard. Who knows what will happen? Some of us may lose our jobs, but thankfully, we will never lose our calling, for it is precisely these callings that give our lives a sense of mission and purpose that can make all the difference in these troubled times. For you see, it is the calling of Jesus that gives us the strength to stand up when others try to put us down. It is the calling of Jesus that gives us courage to re-learn, and to re-think and to change even when others are throwing in the towel. It is the calling of Jesus that sustains us when everything else in the world seems to be caving in. So you see, we are not alone or without our choices in these matters.... The world may heap all kinds of hardships upon us, but even in our own suffering, Jesus is calling us to have courage and to walk with him so that together we might bring hope to the hopeless and light to the darkness. Together with Jesus we are called to redefine that which is desolate and broken and call forth from it healing and wholeness and fruitfulness once more. And we begin this journey, this calling, by looking deep within ourselves to identify and to develop that unique contribution, that mission, that God-given passion that makes us a part of the solution that brings healing to our planet ...instead of being just one more piñata.

Therefore, as followers of Jesus Christ, it is my prayer that together we discover that it is our callings that gives us our real identity, our real strength and our real purpose....May God give us the wisdom and the faith to use our callings wisely ..to bring hope, peace, and faith back to the world.