

Preached by Carl rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
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1 Corinthians 7: 29-31

LET ALL THE PEOPLE PRAISE THE LORD

Wouldn't it be great if you could know that when you were prompted to do something you were being asked to do so by Jesus. When you have those urges to stand up and be counted, wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to claim that, yes, I know this is God's Word. It's not just my opinion. It's not just my feeling.

Wouldn't it be amazing to know that when you sit still and don't feel the need to correct or to contribute, but only to listen to a conversation to know that was the Lord's prompting and not just your shyness.

Jesus started his ministry when his friend and his relative John the Baptist was at a low point—when he had been arrested. And not long after Jesus started his ministry, his friend John would be killed by beheading.

When we exercise our spiritual freedom to begin, when we consciously decide to be humble or compassionate, when we as a people are prompted to respond to another in service to Christ without regard to the cost or the commitment but freely, there are times we can be sure without any doubt that it is God prompting us.

This year I will have been ordained 25 years as a minister in the Presbyterian Church. But almost 30 years ago, I remember going to a fellowship dinner in the basement of 1st Presbyterian in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. It was our going-away party after a year of service to the church (and a year of walking around the block every night literally in tears because everything in our life was about to change). My wife was going to give up a good job. I was going to move from church to seminary. And I remember being so frightened that at that fellowship dinner, I got the hiccups. But it was one of those cases of hiccups that was so bad that before I could go to sleep, they had to take me to the emergency room and sedate me. And I remember a man coming up to me as we waited to go through the buffet line and saying, "I'm so glad it's you and not me."

When we are willing to trust God's timing, it doesn't mean we are all going to go to seminary. What it does mean is that the time we give and the contributions that we offer to the body of Christ will be prompted by God.

I think most of us, if not all of us, find ourselves doubting whether God is prompting us. One writer has called such doubts the "ants in the pants of faith." They make us uncomfortable—those decisions to follow where we believe God is leading, but we're not sure because it could be us.

I asked everybody I knew those 30 years ago how I could be sure. I got lots of good responses. One was from a distant cousin, Charles Rush, who was an itinerant Baptist minister and a full time electrician. I remember going to his job site and saying, “How can I be sure?” His response was classic. I didn’t know it at the time, but he said, “Carl, if you can do anything else, don’t become a minister. If you can be happy doing anything else, don’t go to seminary.” Not because it’s a bad thing, but because our calls to ministry need to be as irresistible as when we were called into relationships with Christ.

But so often we think that this ministry is more powerful or more significant than other calls. That is not the case. Every time we hear God’s call, we aren’t going to be shipped off to some far-off mission field. We’re not going to be relocated to some desperate part of the world that needs exactly what we can do. Most of the time when we respond to God’s call to ministry, God will put us to work right where we are—in the very office where we are already serving, at the very desk where we are already working.

Jesus started his ministry in Galilee. He called his disciples from there. But after his ministry on earth was completed—after his resurrection, his rising up from the dead—where did he send the disciples? Back to Galilee. “I will go before you. Meet me in Galilee.” Wherever we are; whatever we are doing, God’s will for us is that we are his ministers first and foremost.

Our exec—he doesn’t like to be called our executive—our General Presbyter loves to tell me, “Carl, remember, you are God’s minister; you are the people’s pastor. Don’t get the two confused.”

What is the right job for you in the family of God? What is the right place for you? Have you spent most of your spiritual life searching, looking for that church home, the right group of friends, the right job, the right place to be God’s minister? All the while Jesus was calling out, “Recognize! Recognize your own selfish love, your own self idolatry. Repent from that. Believe in God.” And what? “Follow. Come to where I am.”

Many people are still asking themselves, and I feel sometimes they are asking me, what exactly does it mean to follow? What will it look like? What will I be doing when I am following Jesus the way you are describing?

The first thing it means is turning your back on your natural inclination to take care of yourself first—your instinct to preserve your position, your place, your security, your self-interest, your agenda, your own aggrandizement.

I spent some time this past week, in between e-mails back and forth with the office, I was talking with some friends who don’t normally go to a church where I would be ministering. They were guys. We were doing the guy thing, and I listened and I watched. Every story got one-upped by the next guy who responded. Have you ever been there? Have you ever seen that happen? I believe if somebody had said they had fallen out of an airplane and landed safely to the ground without a parachute, somebody would have had a better story. One story after another.

It was comical and funny, but it also reminded me how easy it is to wait our turn to speak and how hard it is to listen. What does it mean to truly love another person enough to stop thinking about self because God forsook himself completely in Christ and listened to our needs and then responded by dying on the cross. What does it mean to be in relationship with another person so completely that the way God has loved us changes that relationship?

Too often we are more willing to turn brothers and sisters against one another the way Paul cautioned us not to, in order to see our definition of Christianity move forward. Too often fulfilling our desires makes us lost, and we wonder why we aren't hearing God's word for us at this point in time. Our understanding of what Jesus means to us means that we have to conquer; not on our own, but with the Holy Spirit's help. We have to conquer to guarantee our future. Not our study, not our position, not even our best conduct; but only God can be trusted with our future.

And when that trust grabs hold of us as never before, we will be willing to be Christ-like with one another. We will be willing to take up a cross that we would not have lifted on our own. We will be willing to become the word and the flesh in the same way that Christ lived out every truth of the law and every demand of grace.

Now I know we're skeptical about sermons that challenge us to review our attitudes and our assumptions, especially those about one another. I know we are skeptical of sermons that ask us to look at our lives and do an accounting. But when the disciples decided to follow Jesus—when they responded to his call, they felt that irresistible compulsion to move exactly where he was pushing them. He taught them lessons such as, "Pray for the person whom you consider to be against you."

When was the last time you prayed for that co-worker who got on your last nerve? I mean really prayed for him? Not prayed that they would get transferred. Prayed for them. We don't do it, do we? We spend so much time and energy caught up in emotional and spiritual frettings, but all we need to do is pray for that person we believe is dead wrong. And watch out! God will change the person who has the problem. And that's usually us, isn't it?

James and John thought it was all about being first—about sitting on the left and the right of Jesus. Peter thought it was all about being tough. Jesus told them, "It's about promoting the kingdom of God that is already within your grasp."

I fear that sometimes you weary of my agrarian illustrations, but I read this one and I couldn't help but think, "It sounds just like a Presbyterian to me." Harvey McKay tells this story about a state fair where a draft horse won a pulling contest by pulling a sled that weighed 4,500 lbs. First place. Not far behind in second was a horse that managed to pull 4,000 lbs. After the competition, the two owners decided to put their two horses together and see what both horses could pull. Together the two horses pulled 12,000 lbs.

I see dedicated, committed, honorable Presbyterians pulling a sleigh of responsibility and duty and very often I see them wearying themselves because they're doing it alone. Think of the synergy, if we allowed someone else to help us. Think of how much more we could enjoy being in harness with Christ if we were only in harness with one another.

I know somebody is going to walk out of here and say, "I'm doing that already. Why are you telling me this?" If you are doing that, claim the victory because you've overcome self by God's spirit. But that's a tough battle. And we need to fight it over and over again. And just when we think we've arrived at overcoming self, we need to take two steps back and say, "Oops - there I am again; the world's revolving around me," or so it seems.

I encourage you to take the truth of what Paul is saying to an early Christian church, and go out and live the gospel as you have never lived it before. Do it in concert with other believers—other brothers and sisters in this place—because, now is the time, this is the place, God's call is your life.

So may it always be for us and for all who come to us.
Amen.