

1st Corinthians 1:18-31
Matthew 5:1-16

A Call to Community

January 29, 2023

Psalm 15

O LORD, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your holy hill?

Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart;
who do not slander with their tongue,
and do no evil to their friends,
nor take up a reproach against their neighbours;
in whose eyes the wicked are despised,
but who honour those who fear the LORD;
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;
who do not lend money at interest,
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.

Those who do these things shall never be moved.

First Corinthians 1:18-31
Christ and the Wisdom of God

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast

in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'

Matthew 5:1-16

The Beatitudes

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Salt and Light

'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Slide: Life Together (cork screw tree and canopy)

When we last met for worship, Susanne led us through a part of Matthew chapter 4 in which Jesus calls individual fisherman to follow him. Waiting for a call; recognizing a call; having the courage to follow a call—these are ageless and current questions for each person. In chapter 5 of Matthew we have a group of disciples who did respond to a call and they follow Jesus up a big hill. This is the beginning of a community inclined towards the teachings of Jesus, although they are far from perfect in living those teachings. This is the beginning of a community, not based on family connections although some are related. This is the beginning of a community, although not always in agreement or supportive of each other. This is the beginnings of a community, which seeks to imitate Jesus and fails as often as it succeeds. Today's scriptures from Matthew 5 and 1st Corinthians 1 introduce us to the idea that while we experience individual calls from Jesus Christ, we live them out in a spiritual community. This is not easy and it brought to mind a Dietrich Bonhoeffer quote from his book *Life Together*.

Let [the one] who cannot be alone beware of community... Alone you stood before God when he called you; alone you had to answer that call; alone you had to struggle and pray; and alone you will die and give an account to God. You cannot escape from yourself; for God has singled you out... But the reverse is also true:

Let [the one] who is not in community beware of being alone. Into the community you were called, the call was not meant for you alone; in the community of the called you bear your cross, you struggle, you pray. You are not alone, even in death, and on the Last Day you will be only one member of the great congregation of Jesus Christ... "If I die, then I am not alone in death; if I suffer they [the fellowship] will suffer with me".¹

Slide: hazy people on a mountain

We will return to Bonhoeffer's quote, but I need to make several observations about our Matthew text which pushed me to consider this concept of a "call to community". First, God chose them, and us, to be a spiritual community living a new reality into being. Rob Bell elaborates that the best and brightest of the

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *A Guide to Prayer* edited by Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck, (Nashville, TN: The Upper Room, 1993), p. 179.

Jewish students in first century Palestine would have been applying for an internship with a Rabbi, which was a place of learning. The Rabbi could say no as easily as yes. Note—it was the students who applied to study, not a teacher who called the student.² God in Christ chooses us not because we are top of the class or the wealthiest or the most attractive persons; or we might be all three. The point is that Jesus called them by name and then hauled them up a large hill together and gave them the curriculum. The syllabus: be humble, be hopeful, be just, be patient, be peace-minded, be steadfast, be forgiving, and such things. At Christ's request, we are here together. Jesus seeks us out as individuals and then forms a community of discipleship to be salt and light for the world. We are not here for who have been, but who we are becoming. This is true of us and those next to us.

Secondly, while these teachings happen on “the mountain”, the vast majority of life is spent ambling in the valleys. In years past I have spoken of the significance of “the mountain” in biblical literature. For today's text I will simply draw attention that this reference to “the mountain” in 5:1 is paralleled by the post-resurrection account of Jesus in which he again meets the disciples on “the mountain”. At that point he gives them the great commission to preach, teach, and baptize (Matt 28:16-20). The “sermon on the mount” is bookended by the “great commission”. The stuff of the sermon on the mount is part and parcel of our Christian witness.

But why in community? It is the community, flawed as it is, which helps shape and hone the virtues which reflect the character of Christ and the One who sent him. A lengthy quote now from the “Introduction” of Stanley Hauerwas' *A Community of Character*:

“I contend that the only reason for being Christian...is because Christian convictions are true; and the only reason for participation in the church is that it is the community that pledges to form its life by that truth....Any community and polity is known and should be judged by the kind of people it develops...It is from the life of the church, past, present, and future, that we even come to understand the nature of politics and have a norm by which all other politics can be judged...the fact that we have often been less than we were meant to be should never be used as an excuse for shirking the task of being the people of God...if, as I contend, the church is a truthful polity, the most important social task of Christians is to be nothing less than a community capable of forming people with virtues sufficient to witness to God's truth in the world.”³

This is meaty stuff, so let me share a story of how the church has lived into its calling in decades past.

² See Rob Bell's Nooma video *Dust*.

³ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp 1-3

Slide: painting by Marius Ghitar

It is the journey of Pastor André Trocmé, his wife Magda, and the community of Le Chambon. Many of you know this bit of history from WWII, but good stories bear repeating.

In Israel there are trees planted in honor of the “righteous gentiles” who risked their lives to save Jews during the “epoch of extermination.” One of them bears the name of André Trocmé, Protestant pastor of a small French village called Le Chambon. During the years of the Nazi occupation the citizens of Le Chambon quietly organized to offer a haven to thousands of Jewish refugees who were thus saved from certain death.

Just as remarkable as the courage and generosity of the people of Le Chambon was the fact that they themselves did not regard their own actions to be in any way remarkable; they were simply the most obvious expressions of human decency. The full story of Le Chambon must give credit to the many hundreds of persons who took part in this “conspiracy of goodness,” but there is little doubt of the key part played by pastor André Trocmé...at the core of Trocmé’s ministry was a literal commitment to the Sermon on the Mount and a conviction that the essence of the gospel lay in the love of God and neighbor.” Arriving in 1934, this is what he sought to instill into his congregation through his words and actions.

“The test came with the fall of France in 1940...it was not long before the values of ultranationalism and chauvinism were insinuated throughout the countryside. From the beginning, through small acts of defiance, Pastor Trocmé made it clear that his village would not submit to the spirit of fear and hatred. As word of the village spread, Le Chambon became a magnet for refugees of the war and others fleeing the net of persecution... In an organization centered around the presbytery and a core of church elders, the village became a safe haven for refugees.”

They hid them in their hay lofts, under their trap doors, in the mountain fields they tilled, in their own bedrooms as if they were part of the family, in the church, in the school, and so on. The numbers of persons rescued in Le Chambon are modest, some 2500, but the achievement was extraordinary. Trocmé is quoted as saying, “Nonviolence was not a theory superimposed upon reality, it was an itinerary that we explored day after day in communal prayer and in obedience to the commands of the Spirit.”⁴

⁴ Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for our Time* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co: 1998), pp 157-158. See also [André and Magda Trocmé, Daniel Trocmé \(yadvashem.org\)](http://yadvashem.org)

Why do we go to church and bring our kids to church and bring our grandchildren to church? So that over time they and we might be slowly moulded into a vestige of the Christ we seek to follow. Let us return to the early church.

Slide: “Paul and the Stoics” book cover by Troels Enberge Perdersen

1st Corinthians One talks about the wisdom of the world as well as the wisdom of God named as Jesus. Jesus wisdom and world wisdom are not the same. Stoicism was all rage in 1st century Roman occupied regions.⁵ [In the hard copy of my sermon as the web version I refer people to a reasonable compare / contrast of Stoicism and Christianity.] I will not bore us with a long comparison of Christianity and Stoicism, but a main difference I notice is the more individualistic track of Stoicism in relation to Christianity. I offer one quote from an article I was reading on this topic.

Christians and stoics shared much by way of leading a virtuous life, but they also contrasted. A “big difference between the two worldviews is Christians ask God for help, while the Stoics seek help from within.” Through prayer, Christians ask for wisdom, courage and strength. “By contrast, Stoicism tells us that if we want any good, we need to get it from ourselves. No spirit will relieve us from our pains”.⁶ The very individualistic tendencies of Corinth become apparent as one moves through the 1st Corinthians letter (see 1:10 ff; 3:1ff; 12:1ff). The illusion of self-sufficiency and individualism persist in our world. Are we sufficient unto ourselves or is there something beyond the self? That is the wisdom question of 1st century Corinth. Can we live the virtuous life on our own? Can we? The early church thought not.

Slide: Catacomb Painting

We are to the last section of this sermon. I offer four concrete ways in which the early church sought grounding in their call: two are personal and two are corporate. At the macro level, we simply keep gathering. We come to a place in which we acknowledge our shortcomings and create space for learning. We meet to sing, to hear the scriptures read, to fellowship, to allow us to be formed and sustained by a tradition which is a part of us and yet beyond us. This is the collective act of worship in which we hear scripture, abide in a sacred space, come face to face with our inner thoughts, and fellowship. In a place of worship we remember again our calling as persons and as a congregation. It is a place to hit restart. Do not neglect to meet, Hebrews 10:25 states.

⁵ J. Paul Sampley, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* in “The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes” [Volume 10], (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), p. 783.

⁶ [Stoicism and Christianity: Lessons, Similarities and Differences \(dailystoic.com\)](http://dailystoic.com)

Micro shifts. This is a leading edge of behavioral modification, but actually it is rather ancient. When we think of cursing another, we are invited to find the images and words to bless the other—a micro shift. When we wish to hold another’s transgression against them, we remind ourselves of all that for which we have been forgiven—a micro shift taken from the Lord’s Prayer. When anxious, we consider the flowers and birds around us—micro shift from the Sermon on the Mount. Micro shifts do lead to greater spiritual traction.

A third practice relates to my last thought and is a personal as well as a corporate act. The instruction manual for the early church on how to be Christian was called the *Didache*. Part of the training to be a Christian, and advice to all Christians, was to recite the Lord’s Prayer three times a day.⁷ The Lord’s prayer affirms that we are not ultimately in control of this huge project called family or future. The Lord’s prayer invites us to give thanks for our daily bread when we have it. The Lord’s prayer invites us to be more forgiving and to receive forgiveness. The Lord’s prayer entrusts the future to God. It is a good prayer and three times a day helps us remember again who we are called to be. At least this is what the early church decided upon.

Finally, as individuals and as a congregation we join together in public ministry. Those alongside early church members did not say, “Wow! Look at what they say” or “Wow! Look at what they write”. “Christianity’s truth was visible; it was embodied and enacted by its members.”⁸ It was through the daily living of Christ-like-ness that the Christian calling rooted in community spread. The results of this theology in action resulted in major shifts within the Roman Empire.

The upshot is that good habits can be formed. The upshot is that a community of worship reinforces those habits. The upshot is that a community of faith holds us as we live into those habits and as we navigate circumstances unknown. We keep to the goal of embodying salt and light in our church, in our families, in our communities. We do the best we can knowing it will not be perfect. And that takes me to my conclusion

The lectionary pairing of the Psalm reading of the day (Ps 15) with Matthew 5 and 1st Corinthians One makes sense to me. Who is able “to dwell on God’s holy hill? Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak truth from their hearts.” Really? If this were the case, the disciples would not have been able to dwell on that holy hill with Jesus. If this were the case the Corinthian Christians, messed up as they were, would not have been able to dwell on that holy

⁷ *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary* by Aaron Milavec (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), p. 21.

⁸ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2016), p. 61.

hill. If this is the case there would be a precious few on God's holy hill. Who could stand? Who would be there? Who?

Yet in our gospels we have new and raw and flawed ones invited up a hill to listen. They get to dwell there. And then they go down the hill to practice and learn some more. And then they are invited up the mountain again. We do the best we can as individuals and as a congregation. Then we go up the mountain once more to learn again. It is a story of grace and of calling. May we live it

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Christianity and Stoicism Compare / Contrast

Similarities

Among the parallels between Stoicism and Christianity, both are monotheistic. Stoicism follows Heraclitus and believes in one Logos; Christianity follows Jesus, and requires followers to believe in the one true God and have no other gods before him [her]. Additionally, both Stoicism and Christianity serve the will of the Logos/God. They teach we can liberate ourselves from fear and anxiety by submitting to the will of the Divine.

Moreover, both Stoicism and Christianity pose the question, “Who or what is a person serving?” All one does is based on the answer. Rather than be a slave to others, both Stoicism and Christianity involve evolving from focusing on the self to a self rooted in serving God. In Matthew 6:24, it is written that it is impossible to worship two gods at once. Adoration for one feeds contempt for the other. So one cannot worship both God and money or God and other people’s opinions. Serving the self focuses on outer appearance; serving the God within breaks the chains of slavery to public opinion and enables the follower to seek good. Finally, both Stoicism and Christianity seek simplicity in worship. If worship is showy, it may mean a person wants others to notice him or her, which is serving the outside self rather than the inner God. As Matthew 6:6 states, “If you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then, your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Differences

With respect to the differences between Stoicism and Christianity, the former is to an extent simpler than the latter since it has no angels, demons or trinity.

Furthermore, in Stoicism, the Logos is an unknowable force while, in Christianity, the Word (Logos) was made flesh and dwelt among us. For the Stoics, a relationship with the Logos is distant, intellectual, and based on the ideas of duty and virtue. In Christianity, a relationship with the Logos is much more personal. It teaches that God wants our love and praise, and is willing to die for it.

Another big difference between the two worldviews is Christians ask God for help, while the Stoics seek help from within. Through prayer, Christians ask to be released from suffering, healed when sick, and comforted in sorrow. By contrast, Stoicism tells us that if we want any good, we need to get it from ourselves. No spirit will relieve us from our pains.

Stoicism and Christianity have competing views about human nature as well. For the Stoics, nature has instilled people with the capacity to reason, which we can exercise to live out virtuous, dutiful lives. Christians, on the other hand, believe people are born with original sin, which has corrupted our internal moral compass. While it is possible to better ourselves by using reason, it is only by the

grace of God that people are improved and saved. On the flip side, the Stoics viewed the mentally handicapped as defective, while in Christianity, they are viewed as children of God worthy of love and respect.

Stoicism and Christianity also have diverging points of view about the afterlife. In Christianity, this world is but a shadow of the world yet to come. At the end of time, the dead will rise, Christ will return to separate the sheep from the goats, and the Kingdom of God will be established on Earth. Conversely, the Stoics made little mention of an afterlife and were agnostic about what, if anything lies beyond the grave. For the Stoics, what matters isn't so much what may or may not happen after death, but how we make best use of the time we have now.

Christians and Stoics shared much by way of leading a virtuous life, but they also contrasted. A “big difference between the two worldviews is Christians ask God for help, while the Stoics seek help from within. Through prayer, Christians ask to be released from suffering, healed when sick, and comforted in sorrow. By contrast, Stoicism tells us that if we want any good, we need to get it from ourselves. No spirit will relieve us from our pains. Stoicism and Christianity have competing views about human nature as well. For the Stoics, nature has instilled people with the capacity to reason, which we can exercise to live out virtuous, dutiful lives. Christians, on the other hand,” appeal to the Divine for strength in support in walking the good path.⁹

⁹[Stoicism and Christianity: Lessons, Similarities and Differences \(dailystoic.com\)](http://dailystoic.com)