

Dr. Tommy Potter  
Brite Divinity School  
Sermon preached at Trinity Christian Church (DOC)  
Sunday, June 24, 2007

**“LEAST LIKELY to MOST LIKELY”**

Mark 1:14-20  
(Jonah 3:1-5)

Introduction:

I am grateful to our Senior Minister, Katie, for the invitation to preach on this Sunday while she and her daughters share time together on vacation. I hope you will join me in the hope and prayer that Katie will find times of Sabbath and peace during this time away from her responsibilities as our pastor. I know you agree with me that we want our Sr. Minister to be a spiritually healthy servant of God, and a happy and loving mother and wife to her family.

I also bring you greetings from Dr. Victor Boschini, Chancellor of Texas Christian University, and Dr. Newell Williams, President of Brite Divinity School. Both TCU and Brite are in exciting times, with massive construction on the university campus, and a capital campaign to raise the necessary funds to build a new academic building on the Brite campus.

I brought my ministry to Brite, my *alma mater*, almost 2 years ago, to join the team to advance the seminary into the future. Currently Brite provides graduate theological education and training for ministry, to around 300 students, in a building built in 1953, for 100 students. With 30 faculty members and the administrative staff required to provide this education and training, we are, to say the least, cramped for space. Once we build the Harrison Building to adjoin our one and only building, the Moore Building, we can expand our student body to as many as 450, and thus provide more ministers, pastoral counselors, educators and other professionals for the future church.

I am also charged with responsibilities to enhance our endowment so that we can continue to assist all our students with financial aid and scholarships, thus helping them complete their graduate theological education without amassing additional heavy debt loads which will follow them into ministry.

Our seminary was begun in 1914, by Luke and Eddie Brite, members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Marfa, Texas, who were ranchers in an area known as Valentine in the Davis Mountains. From the proceeds of the sale of a herd of cattle, Brite College of the Bible was begun for the education of men and women for the Christian Church and other denominations. Now 93 years later, the mission of Brite Divinity School continues to be "...to educate women and men through programs of instruction, research and scholarship, and other forms of church and community service for ministry, witness, and outreach of the church of Jesus the Christ in the world.

We are proud of students like Michael Fielding and John Bowers who are a part of our student body, and alumni such as our Senior Minister, the Rev. Katie Alexander, and the Rev. Harven Tewes, the Rev. Dr. Hap Lyda, and our minister emeritus, the Rev. Dr. Bob Coleman.

I stand here today to express the thanks of Brite Divinity School and Texas Christian University for our congregation's support of Disciples of Christ Higher Education and Leadership Ministries, through our gifts to the Disciples Mission Fund and especially the Special Thanksgiving Offering each year. Thank you, very much.

Now, please find #574 in the *Chalice Hymnal*, and let us pray these words together....

*"Cleanse the Thoughts of Our Hearts"*

*Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name. Amen.*

*-- Gregorian Sacramentary (6<sup>th</sup> Century), alt.*

Sermon:

OK! The stage is set by Mark. Jesus is about to begin his monumental movement into history called the reign of God, or the kingdom of God! His baptism is dramatic enough, (with the dove and voice from the heavens) and it is as if Jesus is ready to stride forth to recapture enemy territory! At last! Jesus is going to reclaim what belongs to God!

And the first thing he does is...

Well...The immediate, first decisive act of revolutionary reclamation is...

...Well, seeing a couple of guys sitting around a fishing boat, mending their torn, worn, smelly nets...Jesus says to them, "Follow me!" And Mark's gospel tells us that they dropped everything they were doing and they followed him.

Let me confess for you as I confess for me, at this point I want to ask why these guys didn't even ask, "Who are you?" "Where are you going?" But, no, they just follow him, without looking back! They become his disciples, his followers, his students.

In Mark's gospel we have our most unrelenting, unflattering portrayals of the disciples. They are uncomprehending of Jesus and his mission from start to finish, which seems all the more amazing that Jesus chooses these guys as his disciples. But, for some reason, Jesus chooses not to do his work without them. They have no training in discipleship, and they have no particular natural gifts for following Jesus. Along the way, they fail to understand everything about Jesus. Time and again they will disappoint him... but Jesus never lets them know it. (What an amazing characteristic! When someone disappoints me I wish I could just move on without feeling the need to let them know they have disappointed me. How about you?) Yet, Jesus will stick w/

them...Jesus will give them all that he has...and he will lead them to the kingdom, as they stumble after him. So, is this any way to begin a kingdom? Not much of an invading army, is it? Untrained, uneducated, untalented fishermen and tax collector, following this rabbi named Jesus.

You have heard this one before, I am sure: A very wealthy man was going on a journey. Before he left he called all his domestic help to meet him on the porch of his mansion. When they arrived he gave the servants everything he owned. To one he gave the keys to his fleet of luxury automobiles. To another, his entire stock and investment portfolio. To another, the key to his home in the city, to his vacation home, his beach house, his mountain cabin by the lake, and the code to the alarm systems in each...and then said, "I'm out of here. You are in charge until I return."

Now, I ask you: Is that any way to run an empire? Trust everything into the hands of amateurs...? It doesn't make a lot of sense to me! But, remember, this is the parable Jesus told his disciples in an effort to explain the "upside down kingdom" he was bringing into the world.

And then I think, there must be some gods who do not ask anything of anyone! After all, if you are a god, why do you need a bunch of amateurs to work w/ you? You are a god and you don't need anyone to do anything! But, here in the gospel we read about how Jesus starts the Reign of God by calling a couple of ordinary people to be his helpers. I can imagine Jesus saying something like this to those who heeded his impressive, persuasive call: "I'm going to change the whole world, and transform the future...radically rearrange the present...and guess who's going to help me?" Well, at least that's the way I would be persuaded to pay attention to him. But the Mark's gospel story recounts that he only said, "Follow me."

I am probably telling your story now. I am narrating just how you came to be here this morning. I am reminding you how you decided you should be a disciple. Simply...you are here because you are called to be here! You may have come here looking for a "good church" or a safe harbor in the midst of the storms of your life. You probably came here because you were hungry for peace; for hope;

for a kind of love that does more than help you make it through the night;  
for options that are right and good; for joy that surpasses instant gratification;  
for a place to be who God made you to be, and to be accepted and wanted;  
for the need to be convinced that you matter; for the moment of assurance,  
that you are a significant child of God, surrounded by other children of God,  
wanting, needing and desiring what the world cannot give, but what the spirit of God can provide. You and I were called here by the provider of every good and perfect gift.

I think we are mistaken when we convince ourselves that our lives are our self-creations. Because, as we truly ponder today's gospel text, we must realize that our lives are the sum of God's decisions; a project of the living Christ; something that the

Lord makes and molds through relentless efforts to reach toward us. You and I are here today, because we were put here by God.

Think about it this way: You and I decide we want to go to hear a live musical performance. We leaf through the entertainment section of the newspaper, or go on-line, and we discover that a concert by someone we enjoy is scheduled for a particular night. We decide to take steps to secure the tickets, and we ready ourselves to go.

But that is not the way we arrive at church! Instead, we move toward the presence of God by being summoned; by being invited; by being addressed; and by being called. You see, this thing called church, truly is by invitation only! We may peddle the notion that our doors are open to all who want to enter, even if we did not make any effort to invite anyone to cross the threshold. The church is comprised of all who are called...internally called by God to be here!

This is our story. This is the story of Trinity Christian Church, Fort Worth, Texas. We have a rich history and phenomenal heritage. Here we are in a new chapter. We have merged two congregations and we are working at living into this marriage. I was thinking about what we have done the other day and I realized that we have married two congregations who really didn't date very long! Let's be open to the possibilities...possibilities not even touched or addressed by the consultants when they visited us a few weeks ago!

Think with me, please: What happens at baptism? Last Sunday, in our 11 AM worship service we participated in the baptism of one of our family. What happened? In the initiation of someone into the Christian life, we say to that person, "The life you live, is not your own. You are named, claimed, and even commandeered. God has plans for you. God has a job for you to fulfill. Now, go live your calling."

Friends, this is good news, because an uncalled and unclaimed life is an empty and extremely sad life. You see, all God has, and all God wants from this world is in the hands of a bunch of amateurs, like you and me. God has no other plan. There is no Plan B! It is a strange way to run this deal, but it is the way God accomplishes what God wants! And all Jesus said was, "Follow me!"

Everyday I talk to students at the seminary who have arrived at this place and this time by different paths. Some are determined in their journey. They graduated from high school, then college, then directly to seminary. In fact, there are more students in our seminary today who have followed this model than in the past two decades. For a while we had a majority of second-career women and men sitting in our classes. Some had a fruitful career but still felt something was missing. Others were active laity who discerned a call to answer God's nudge and guiding hand toward professional training and education for professional ministry. All of our students are searching for their place in this world of leadership in the church of today and tomorrow. Let me say it again:

Thank you, very much, for your support of Brite Divinity School and all our students.

(The following story is from *Pulpit Resource*, volume and date unknown, by Will Williman.)

A university chaplain once told this story: The dean of the school required all fraternities, sororities, and other campus student organizations to complete a certain number of values and character programs in hope that they would improve the life and work of the organizations as well as bring some respectability to campus life. The assignment of accomplishing this task went to the university chaplain. So, he began a process of contacting each fraternity and sorority on campus to offer to help accomplish this goal. On one occasion he invited himself to go to one of the fraternity houses to present a lecture on Christian character. Now, don't you know that these fraternity boys were extremely excited about hearing a lecture from the chaplain!

Well, as he tells the story, when he knocked on the door of the fraternity house, he was greeted by a little boy who looked to be about 9 or 10 yrs old. Wondering what a child was doing over there at night, he entered the house. The little boy said, "They're waiting for you in the big room. Come on and I'll show you." Following his little barefoot leader, the chaplain wound around some hallways and soon arrived at the chapter room, where, sure enough, a large group of college-aged young men were gathered. Did they look excited about spending this time listening to the chaplain? Of course not...but he had a mission... and they had a requirement...and so...he began his presentation on Christian Character. Within a couple of words, the chaplain noticed that the little boy, his guide from the front door, climbed onto the lap of one of the fraternity brothers. In a matter of minutes he fell asleep with his head on his shoulders. The chaplain hammered them for the moral failure of their generation for about 30 minutes. Then, recognizing the glassy look on their eyes, he decided to ask if there were any questions or comments. Of course, there was dead silence. Thinking it best to leave, he thanked them for the honor of this opportunity and he made his way to the front door. Just then he heard a voice say to the little boy, "You go on and get ready for bed. I'll be there in a little while to tuck you in and read you a story." This young man showed the chaplain to the door and walked out onto the porch with him.

The chaplain simply couldn't hold back, and he asked, "Who is the little boy who fell asleep in your arms?"

"Oh, that's Dustin," he said.

"Our fraternity is part of the Big Brother program. That is how we met Dustin. His mom is addicted to cocaine, and she is having a very tough time right now. Sometimes it gets so bad that she can't care for him. So we all agreed to tell Dustin that he could call when he needed us. We gave him a list of five cell phone numbers of our brothers. If he calls, one of us will drive to where he lives, pick him up and bring him to our house, where he can stay with us until it is OK for him to go home. We take him to

school...even purchase clothes for him if he needs them. Our house cook will feed him...and stuff like that.”

Then he looked away and upward to the night sky. “Chaplain, do you know what is amazing? It is amazing that God would pick me and the other guys in this fraternity to do something this good for someone else like Dustin.”

The chaplain smiled through the tears forming in his eyes, and said,

“You are so right. God is amazing!”

He walked down the steps of the porch and climbed into his car. But, before he started his car, the chaplain looked through his windshield toward the fraternity house. He thought about his feeble effort to lecture to them about Christian Character, while they were practicing it before his eyes. Then he uttered a prayer, saying...

“What a way to have a movement, God! You pick the least likely to become the most likely to fulfill your will...your purpose...And, by your grace, it still works. It still works. Amen.”

What God proclaims to us today is... It still works!

Amateurs....It still works!

Amen.