AN INVITATION TO TROUBLE

Mark 4:35-41

TheThird Sunday after Pentecost

One of the great stories of courage and faith which came out of the World War II era is the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. When Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933, Bonhoeffer began speaking against a political system which he believed corrupted and grossly misled a nation and made the "Fuhrer" its idol and god. In 1939 this leader of the Confessional Church in Germany was persuaded by American friends to come to this country. He came, but only for a short time. Instead of waiting out the war in the safety of this country, he felt compelled to return to his homeland and the danger which awaited him. Writing to a friend about his decision, he said, "I shall have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people…Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose, but cannot make this choice in security." In 1943 Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested and imprisoned by the Gestapo. In April of 1945 only a few days before the concentration camp at Flossenburg was liberated by the Allies, he was executed. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship* he wrote, "When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die."

We have a different idea about what it means to be following Christ. A *New York Times* reporter visited a booming mega church in the southwest and wrote about the "drive-through latte stand, Krispy Kreme doughnuts at every service, and sermons on 'how to discipline your children, how to reach your professional goals, how to invest your money, and how to reduce your debt." And in other place it seemed that the primary message was about getting God to serve the demands of self-centered individuals. Now it could certainly be true that a secular reporter looks at church life thought the lens of a personal agenda, but it also true that we live in a church culture where theism, or the worship of God, has been replaced by "me-ism," or the worship of me. More and more folks shop for churches with the same kind of mentality that consumers go from one store to another searching for the best bargain. What drives the church today is not a servant mentality. What drives the church today is not living and dying with Christ, but making sure the church serves my needs and the needs of my family.

How different all of this is from the Bonhoeffer statement: "When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die." Our text for the day from Mark's gospel really knocks a hole in this pseudo Christianity which preaches that obedience to God equals success, wealth, well-being and feeling good. Actually, the invitation to follow Christ is more like an invitation to trouble. This is more in keeping with what we see in the Biblical storm story. As the sun begin to fade after a day of teaching to a great crowd beside the Sea of Galilee, Jesus told the disciples,

> Let us go across to the
> other side.

And so in obedience to what Jesus said, the disciples slipped away from the crowds on the land and into the depths of the Sea. Almost immediately they noticed Jesus falling asleep as the boat rocked across gentle waters. But, soon a great windstorm arose, waves swamped the boat, and it seemed that they were only moments away from being thrown into the dark stormy waters. In contrast to the panic, fear, and sense of impending doom experienced by the twelve disciples, Jesus continued to sleep peacefully in the pitching stern of the boat.

They were out in there in the midst of danger for one reason. They were doing what Jesus told them to do. Such is not what we would expect to happen when we do what Jesus tells us to do. We have the idea that obedience and faithfulness to God will take us toward a place where there is no chaos, no confusion, and no threatening storms. Such was not where Dietrich Bonhoeffer's obedience took him. When Burleigh Law landed his plane in the Congo in 1964 in an attempt to rescue five missionary families only to be murdered by rebels, it was the result of his obedience to Christ. When Jim Elliot and four other missionaries were killed in Ecuador in 1956 by the tribe they were seeking to love, it was the result of obedience to Christ.

If we live thinking that obedience to Christ is going to be like being led down a gentle path in a rose garden, we have missed the mark of our calling as a disciple and our calling as a church. Obedience never takes us to a place where we feel comfortable, where we feel in control, or where everything happens in a logical and predictable manner. Instead it takes us to a place where dependency upon God is absolutely necessary if we are to make it. Whenever I think about the way obedience takes us forward, I remember a sermon by Bruce Wilkinson, the author of *The Prayer of Jabez.* The sermon was preached at a national evangelism conference some years ago in Washington, DC. Wilkinson talked about the way obedience takes us out of our comfort zones. We know how it is. We live in this circle where everything is predictable and where we feel like we are in charge. And then, God asks us to do something which requires stepping outside of our comfort zone into a set of circumstances where we know we will feel totally out of control. God says to us, "I want you to go on a mission trip" and we say, "Hey, Lord, you know I have a job." God says to us, "I want you to share your faith with your friend," and we say, "That's a good way to lose a friend, Lord." God says, "I want you to tithe as a way of trusting me to provide," and we say, "Can't do it, Lord. People depend on me." God says to us, "Hey, Church, I want you to minister to this community beyond your resources," and we say, "God, we have a budget." God says to us, "Hey, Church, I want you to find new ways to reach all the people I am putting around you," and we say, "Lord, we believe in taking care of our needs first."

Always obedience calls us to turn loose of what is familiar, predictable, and inside the realm of our control so that we can step into a new place. Wilkinson said it is like there is an imaginary line which God calls us to step over. When we step over it, we are

outside of our comfort zone and in a set of unknown circumstances where dependence on Him is not a luxury or an option but a necessity. And after awhile we start getting comfortable in the new place where obedience to God has taken us and the spiritual process of moving forward again over that imaginary line begins anew in the same frightening faith-filled way as before. God does not call us to a place where we can be more comfortable about ourselves, or more secure, or more entertained, but to a place where we can serve and die for His sake. Does this means we are called to die as a martyred missionary? Perhaps, but more likely it means dying to what we want to do with our life and coming alive to what God wants to do with it.

This place of obedience is a troubling place for us to go. It means standing in that mental and spiritual framework where we are open to whatever God wants to do it our life and in our church. What the disciples discovered in the midst of this trouble caused by obedience was Jesus. He was present all along. He had the power to bring them through the trouble to a place where they would be even more connected to Him and more dependent on Him than ever they had been.

God is calling us as disciples and us as His church to move into what is going to be one of the most challenging moments of our life. Going forward in faithful obedience is not going to be easy. Some will say we need to keep things as they are. There will be moments of stress as we struggle with questions about what God is calling us to do. The challenges will seem to require greater resources than we possess. Christ is calling us to die to what is behind us that we might come alive to what He has put before us. It is not going to be like floating down a gentle stream, but there will be moments when it will seem that we are caught up in something over which we have not control. One thing is certain. If we dare to be obedient and move beyond the places of ministry where we are in charge to the unknown places where God is calling us to go, we will experience both the presence and the power of Jesus. Who will come and go with me?

Hymn 724 "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand."

This sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Strickland at the Richmond Hill United Methodist Church in Richmond Hill, Georgia on June 25, 2006.