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A New Day, A Renewed Calling

Psalm 138 ; Romans 12:1-9

Matthew 16:13-20

As Jesus came closer to the time of his departure from this earth, nearing the time of his crucifixion the question must have arisen in his mind: who will continue this God Movement that God has brought to life through me? For so much of his ministry everything had been focused on one person, on Jesus, and that was certainly the right thing to do. But for the most part Jesus was doing everything - the teaching, the leading, the guiding, the healing, the confronting, the casting out of demons – while the disciples followed him, supported him, listened to him, loving him all the way. But when Jesus was no longer with them on earth, who would keep the work going? It was clearly on Jesus’ mind one day when he came with his disciples into Caesarea Philippi.

And so he engaged them in a series of questions. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” That was all well and good, and certainly understandable. People were always trying to figure out who Jesus was. Some even thought he was the devil. But what matters to him in this moment is the next question he asks them: “But who do you say that I am?” And Simon Peter, almost always the first to jump in answered, “You are the Messiah - the Christ – the Son of the living God.” He got it. He understood who Jesus was. Jesus exclaims: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” And now the moment Jesus had been waiting for had come. Now he knew God’s movement through him had a future. And so he says, “I tell you, you are Peter (which translated means “the Rock”) and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Jesus’ movement, what he often called the kingdom of God - the God Movement – would go on through the work and ministry of the church, a word Jesus uses for the first time here. The word “church” comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*, and it means “the called out ones,” the ones Jesus has called to carry out his mission and work on earth. That is who we are, those called to keep the God Movement going.

It’s interesting how different denominations and churches have interpreted this passage over the years. The Catholic Church has long maintained that what Jesus is saying is that the church of Jesus is founded on the person of Peter, who they claim to be the first Pope, all the rest following in succession to the present day and forever. But in churches like ours, the Presbyterian Church, we believe what Jesus is saying is that the church of Jesus is founded on Peter’s confession of faith in Jesus. That is our rock. And so we are a confessional church with a book of many confessions and creeds that state what we believe in. And even still, the church of Jesus is founded on a rock that will never change, Jesus Christ, the Messiah, our Lord. That is our confession and profession.

And that is why ministers may come and ministers go, but the church remains always founded not on Greg Hall your former pastor, or Jason Cashing, your new pastor, but on Jesus. And the work goes forward not because of Greg Hall or Jason Cashing but by God's work in and through you and me, God's people who have heard the call of Jesus, and answered for ourselves who Jesus is: he is our Messiah, our Christ, our Lord, and we follow him. This is a church that cannot fail. It is founded on the Rock, and that Rock is Jesus

We church folk do get confused some times. We think the church is built on the pastor and unless the pastor leads us we remain inert, incapable of functioning and going forward. I've seen it all my life as a pastor.

When I pastored my first church in the mountains of North Carolina, I attempted to explain the Reformation doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers in a sermon one Sunday morning. The basic idea of this teaching is that everyone is a minister, not just the pastor, and everyone is gifted by the Holy Spirit and called to serve. The end result is that the pastor is not the CEO of the church, but simply one of many ministers in the congregation, albeit with a very special calling of ministry to lead the church. The truth is, Jesus Christ is the church's CEO. So, who's the boss? Jesus is the boss.

After the service, I went to the back of the church to greet the people while the choir assembled on the front pew to decide whether or not they should remain in the choir loft during the sermon or join the congregation in the pews. I told them to go ahead and make their decision.

When the last person had left, I turned around only to discover that the choir was still sitting in the front pew. I asked the organist/choir director why they were still there, and she replied with a smile on her face, "Why, we were waiting for you — you're the boss!" It gave all new meaning to Paul's phrase in I Corinthians about the "folly of preaching". (From an early age I wondered: Is anyone listening?)

In Romans 12 Paul spells out just how the church is supposed to work. One thing is clear: when it comes to the life and ministry of the church we are always needing a new mind. Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." What does the world say? That some are more important than others. That power over others is the way life works. But what does the mind transformed to God's will say? "Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually, we are members one of another." Paul then goes on to talk about some of the gifts people in the church have been given, such as prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading, and showing compassion. There are others, as listed in I Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4. Paul's point is that it takes a village to be the church. No one person can carry the load of being the church, and certainly not the pastor. It is the job of each of us, and each of us has a gift to offer. Each of us, even those we might least expect.

I have been sharing one particular story on this theme my entire ministry and it never gets old. It is the story of Owen Young, as told by my friend, and mentor, and teacher, Dr. Dick Armstrong, former professor of evangelism at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Owen Young loved baseball and he loved to call into the local radio station's baseball call-in show to speak with Richard Armstrong, one of the officials of the Baltimore Orioles. Dick Armstrong had played professional baseball for a short time but then moved into management when he couldn't make the cut any longer. He too loved baseball and loved to talk baseball with the area fans. Owen called him most every day. They got to be great telephone buddies even though they never met face-to-face.

The years passed and Dick Armstrong found a new calling, to be a minister, and after going to seminary found himself back in the same community where he had been the baseball radio host. One day, he got the idea that he'd like to look up his old friend, Owen Young. After some investigation he found Owen's address and popped in for a surprise visit. What he found stunned him.

Owen Young was blind, in a wheel chair, and dying of cancer. He let Dick in his house, probably oblivious to the wretched conditions he was living in. What Dick found made him sick. The house was a filthy mess. Owen was living like an animal.

As Owen told his story, Dick's heart broke. Owen lived all alone, with no friends. His only friends were the telephone call in hosts that he talked with regularly. In his neighborhood, he'd become the fall guy for all kinds of pranks, like the numerous times the neighborhood kids rang his doorbell and when he answered the door, they pulled him in his wheelchair out into the street, spun him around, laughing at him as they left him to fend for himself. Here was a man who had nearly lost his humanity, certainly his dignity. And now he was dying of cancer, facing the ending of a miserable life.

As Dick heard his story his heart went out to Owen. He wanted to do something to help. He had an idea. "Owen, would you mind if I brought our Deacons from the church over to help you out a little bit, maybe clean your house and do whatever you need doing?" He didn't want to offend him, but the man clearly needed help. Owen accepted the offer although he couldn't believe it was going to actually happen; people just didn't do nice things for Owen Young.

But right away the Deacons responded and came and cleaned Owen's apartment through and through, and cleaned up Owen himself while they were at it. Owen couldn't believe it. He wanted to know why they did this for him. Their answer? "Owen, we do this for you because we love Jesus and we want you to know Jesus loves you." He was impressed and, of all things, their love for him made him want to know Jesus too. Owen accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Who would have ever thought?

The Deacons continued their relationship with Owen, visiting him regularly, helping him with his needs. One day Owen said, "Now that I'm a Christian, what do I do now? I want to give something to show my thanks." They explained that one way Christians show their thanks is by

giving of their money to the church for God's work. In fact, some of the things they had done for Owen were possible because people gave. Owen decided he wanted to give, too. But how much should he give? They told Owen that he could give whatever he wanted to, but that the church taught that tithing, giving 10% of one's income, was a good goal. Owen thought that was a great idea. He was so grateful that 10% didn't sound like too much, even though it would come out of his meager Social Security check. And so Owen Young was now a Christian and a tither.

Owen felt pretty good about his growing Christian faith, but then one day he told the Deacons that he felt he wasn't doing enough. "I want to serve like you're doing for me," Owen said. This time they brought in the pastor. Dick told Owen that it was really nice that he wanted to serve God, but he wasn't sure what he was able to do. He was blind, in a wheel chair, and dying of cancer; he was quite limited. Could he think of anything he could do? Owen thought for awhile, coming up with nothing and looking rather glum, but then suddenly in a burst of humor said, "I can memorize phone numbers and call people on the phone!" – just like he had when he used to call Dick on the radio call-in show. They laughed together for a moment but then suddenly Dick blurted out, "That's it! You can make phone calls! We have a large number of shut-ins who get so lonely and need someone to talk to. You could call them!" Owen loved the idea. It was something he could do to serve God.

And so Owen Young trusted in Jesus, gave 10% of his income to God's work in the church, and made phone calls to several shut-ins every day for the rest of his life.

When Owen died, a memorial service was held at the church, that was packed with all the people Owen Young had touched in his brief Christian life. Among them were several of the shut-ins whom Owen had called every day. When the time came for giving thanks for Owen's life, one of the older women said, "Before Owen Young came into my life, I had lost all meaning in my life. I didn't want to live. And then suddenly he started calling me every day and we talked and talked. He was such a good friend. I thank God for Owen Young because he gave me back my life."

I love what Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, that there are to be no unemployed people in the church. What he meant is that everyone has a job to do in church, no matter what our age, or ability, or talents, or gifts. The only question is, will we offer them and build up the church, or withhold them and thereby keep the church from being everything God intends it to be.

What is the gift God is calling you to offer? For me in retirement it is teaching the 5, 6, and 7 year olds Sunday School class in my church, something I have never done before and I love it. We're never too old or too young, to be of service to God. And like Owen Young, none of us is without the gifts to do it. As Jason Cashing begins his ministry next Sunday in this pulpit, do not think this is the time to sit back and let Jason take it from here. Rather, this is the time to rise up and say, "Here am I, Lord. Ready to serve along with Jason. We will begin this new day together. Send me."