A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

***“Our Singular Calling”***

Ephesians 4:1-16

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Those of us of a certain age drew inspiration from *Dead Poet’s Society* in which Robin Williams plays John Keating, a renegade teacher at Welton Academy, a conservative, elite, all-boys prep school. Whereas all the other teachers in the school fall in line with the rigid, conformist, achievement oriented attitude of Welton, Keating is unorthodox. From lining the boys up in front of old pictures of former students to ripping pages out of a poetry book, to teaching the boys to compose poetry from their hearts to teaching them how to be brave and pursue their dreams, his message to them was singular: carpe diem boys, seize the day. Make your lives extraordinary.

It was the way he said it, with a whisper, like it was a contraband calling, subversive: don’t just work to make your careers successful, make your lives extraordinary.

The boys in the school had never heard anything like that before. They didn’t know their lives could be extraordinary. They thought they were supposed to be capitalists. No one had told them that their lives could be extraordinary: not their parents who pushed them to careers in medicine or law and not their teachers who drilled them on discipline, hard work, achievement.

Oh man, we came out of the theater ready to run through a brick wall. We were fired up to carpe diem. It was the first and only Latin we ever learned. This was a message we’d never heard before either, not really. I mean, in my house the bar was set somewhat lower. When I would leave the house as a teenager to go out, the charge I heard was, whatever you do, don’t embarrass the family, as if we had a family legacy in society to uphold. Our expectations for life were somewhat more modest than to make your life extraordinary.

The biblical version of make your lives extraordinary has to be the opening line in Ephesians 4. In Ephesians 4, the Apostle Paul pivots from three chapters of theological, doctrinal, doxological instruction to three chapters of counsel, teaching, and advice on how to live.

I beg you, he begins. We know immediately this is not casual advice. This is said in whispers, with urgency, and is, in fact, in its way, actually contraband. Paul is sending out the letter from prison in Rome. At Welton Academy, Paul’s imprisonment was probably taught as a cautionary tale of what happens when you don’t follow the rules, but in the New Testament vision of life, Paul’s imprisonment is a crown of honor. He’s not ashamed of it; he’s proud of it. To be in prison for the Lord is not a failure of excellence, but the mark of extraordinary faithfulness. It was then, and in many ways is now, that to suffer for your faith is still a mark of faithfulness. We don’t seek suffering for suffering’s sake, but we don’t run from it either. We run to Jesus whatever is on the path whether pleasure or pain, riches or poverty, sickness or health, freedom or prison, until in death are we fully united with our Lord.

That’s the kind of message Paul preached all the time. And he lived it. Preaching it and living it are more or less the organization of Ephesians, what you believe and how you live.

What the Apostle charges to Christians is much more than don’t embarrass the family, more profound than the drive to achieve success, and even more important than seize the day, make your lives extraordinary. Paul’s theological language elevates life to another plane entirely:

I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called. It begs the question: what is the calling to which you have been called? It’s a question we should all ask ourselves. What is the calling to which I have been called?

I grew up with “calling” language. In youth group we wondered if we were called to ministry. If we were called that meant we would either become a pastor of a big church with a tall steeple or a missionary to Africa to live in a hut. No one chose the hut, and to my knowledge, none of them preach under a tall steeple, though some of them were called and went on to do amazing things. Two of them are music ministers; one of them has been on a church staff for years. Another of them adopted three orphaned children from Russia, but we wouldn’t have thought to consider that a calling. It’s always amazing to look back at what people you knew way back in life are doing. That group grew up to do some really interesting things: own a business, teach audio and film at a college, play for the symphony, travel internationally, stay at home and raise children. I wonder how many of them think of what they do as a calling since they aren’t preaching under a steeple or living in a thatch-roof hut in Africa.

The way we knew we were called is that we would feel something stir in our hearts, something that told us that we believed we were supposed to give our lives to God. The way we put it is that we were surrendering to the ministry, which gave “the ministry” a kind of mysterious power and gave us the dual benefit of being both high-fived by our peers who said they admired the adventure we were undertaking, and hugged by our grandmas, who were sympathetic to us for being martyrs. They’d been around long enough to know what church work could be like.

We didn’t know anything much about that. What we knew is that we were supposed to love Jesus, and we did, and we wanted to serve him. The church, and probably for some people, though none I knew, a grass hut, seemed like the way to do it. And we loved *carpe diem* and passages like this one from Ephesians which begins: Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you’ve been called, and a few verses later said that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry.

If you’re called, you’re called to something like that, on a list like that, we figured. **Apostle** isn’t really a career option since those were pretty much the first 12 plus St Paul. **Prophet** sounded kind of like a lot of fun. You could tell people what they were supposed to do, but prophets were a little scary, too. For every Nathan who told philandering David, “You are the man,” there was a Jeremiah walking around in stocks, or a John the Baptist eating locusts. Lots of people say they are prophets when they tell other people what they are doing wrong, but as a friend of mine (John Chandler) said, “Real prophets weep more than they rail.” So prophet was pretty much out. Some are **evangelists**, which is wonderful. We need more people who unabashedly tell people about Jesus, but we all took the spiritual gifts inventory, which was the enneagram assessment of the ‘80s, and none of us got the gift of evangelism, probably because we were moderate Baptists more than anything actually having to do with the Spirit or the Spirit’s gifts, but we’d crossed that off long before we figured that out. We knew that Paul’s list wasn’t exhaustive, but what was left on that list were **pastors** and **teachers**, both of which we understood because we had pastors and teachers in our lives and some of them loved us and loved Jesus and made us want to be like them when we grew up. A few of us did, or tried our best, and so we were the ones who were called.

The truth is that the church needs to encourage her young people to take seriously the possibility that they may be “called” to ministry and that ministry is a lot more varied than we thought back then: there’s pastor of big churches with tall steeples, but there’s a lot more pastors of small congregations who love their people, too. There are missionaries in huts in Africa, and some of them preach all the time. Others of them help drill wells, run hospitals, and consult about water retention and sustainable farming practices. Some of them aren’t even in Africa, but all over the world, giving witness by their lives to the love of God in Jesus Christ in places like eastern Europe, still recovering from the spiritually chilling legacy of communism, and in western Europe, now fully in the grip of the spiritually deadening culture of modern materialism. Some are in China, in the underground church movement, with Christians who know prison and even worse. And some are in many other places in the world, on the border helping make the lives of immigrants a little less awful right now. We’re part of a group of churches who have missionaries who serve in the 20 poorest counties in the United States. We should pray for all of them more than we do. All missionaries are not Americans. I didn’t used to understand that, but now I’ve met Christians from India and South America who are here, in Texas, as missionaries. We should pray for them too.

Paul describes the important roles that people have in the church as gifts from God to “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” He honors those people. But that’s not just who Paul has in mind when he begs, “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” I think he means that those people are there to help you in various ways lead a life worthy of the calling to which **you** have been called. The called are not just people who have ordained roles in the church -- it’s all Christians. We are all called by God.

And the point in this passage is not to help us discern what job or position we’re to do, though a big part of life is knowing what kind of work you will do, and knowing how you’re supposed to know the kind of work you will do. That’s important, but not really what we’re talking about here. This is a higher calling, which is then lived out through the work that you do. The higher calling is to grow up.

We must grow up together until we all come to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God. We must grow up, to maturity, to the full measure of Christ. We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.

The calling to which you have been called is to become one with Christ and one in Christ. The Greeks call this theosis. The Wesleyans call it sanctification. Others call it divinization. It is growing up in discipleship, maturing into oneness with Jesus Christ who is present with us by the Holy Spirit. This is our calling. This is our singular calling. We all share it. We share it together. It is individual and communal. It is personal and relational. And if you feel daunted by that even a little bit, like you might say, if you only knew me, you would know how ridiculous this sounds, you’re not alone. You think you’re alone, but you’re not. Everyone around feels the same way right now. But, *carpe diem y’all.*  This is our calling, however we live it out, as evangelists or pastors, parents or singles, teachers or techies, whether as lawyers or poets, this is the calling we all share together, to grow into Christ.

Notice how it’s not just about growing to be like Christ. That’s a part of it for sure. Jesus had disciples for whom he was their rabbi. Disciples learned to emulate their rabbi: his wisdom and his way of life. It was a little like school if you only had one teacher, a small group of students, and you were together all day, just about every day. The Mishna (Avot 1:4) has a saying about how disciples are to learn from their masters:

*Let thy house be a meeting-house for the wise;*  
*and powder thyself in the dust of their feet;*  
*and drink their words with thirstiness.* (2)

In other words, sit so closely to your teacher that he kicks some dust on you; walk so closely behind your teacher, your rabbi, that the dust he kicks up from his sandals would land on you. That’s the idea of being like Jesus, of growing to be like Jesus, which would be the highest form of discipleship for any other rabbi. But we don’t have any other rabbi, we have Jesus, though crucified and buried, resurrected and alive, present with us. We don’t just grow up to be **like him** though that would be extraordinary, we grow up to be **in him**.

Frederica Mathewes Green writes in *The Illumined Heart*, “This is a profoundly transforming condition; it means the very life of Jesus himself is with you, illuminating you . . .This is the calling of every Christian . . .One’s essential being is permeated and filled with the presence of God. It is something more than merely resembling Jesus, more than merely ‘following.’ It is transformation.” (p 25)

When Robin Williams told the boys to make their lives extraordinary, he was just beginning to give them permission to acknowledge that in each of us there’s a fire burning, set there by our Creator, fanned by the Holy Spirit, fueled by Jesus Christ, a fire that cannot be contained. It is a fire we share with one another and with God whose presence, remember, all through scripture, is through fire: the burning bush, the pillar of fire, the tongues of fire resting on the disciples at Pentecost, Jesus transfigured. That fire burns in you. It is a fire to, yes, make your life extraordinary, even more to lead a life worthy of the sacred fire, worthy of the calling to which you have been called, which is to live in Jesus, that you may be one with Jesus. This is your calling. To live a life worthy of this calling is not for your own satisfaction, though you may find yourself intensely satisfied, not for your own glory, though others may glorify you or they may throw you in prison, not for your own pleasure, though you may discover a deep fount of joy. It is to participate in the glory of God which is the intent and the purpose of all creation. Once we begin to discover this, then whether we are apostles or accountants, missionaries or stay at home moms, pastors or physicians, evangelists or engineers, teachers or scientists, your calling is to be holy.

Let us pray:

Our Lord and good God, for welcoming us into life with you, we give you thanks. Give us your grace, by which we are made able to love you, to know you, and to grow in you. You love us, each of us, with a love that calls us into a life for which we know we are unworthy, except that in your eyes, through Jesus Christ, we are ennobled, we are beloved, we are called, and we are set on fire. Burn within us, O God of our salvation, that we may live in you. Amen.

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