

Note: The title for both talks together is:

“Who Did Vicente Call?”

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Sermon by Pastor Daniel Harrison and Vicente Gonzalez (Community Activist)

at Church of the Covenant, 10/14/18

As many of you know, I took a once-in-a-lifetime trip this past week with a group of local pastors, largely African-American, but there were a handful of white pastors as well. We rode a bus together through the Civil Rights trail in the South. We began in Danville on Monday morning at the site of Bloody Monday then continued on to Atlanta, then Montgomery, Selma, Birmingham, and then Memphis. It was a trip full of grief, reflection, prayer, and epiphany after epiphany. I am still processing it all in my mind. There is much to unpack and it will take time to do so. However, I will say this, there was a very point in the trip, a very real point, when on the bus the pastor next to me—the pastor of Jackson Street United Methodist Church—one of the first churches built here after the Civil War by freed slaves, it was a moment when he called his daughter after receiving what I believe was a text on his phone. So, he immediately called his daughter who was at home at their parsonage, and asked her to go open their “community center building” because Vicente had an immigrant family that had no place to go. They needed a place to stay the night. As I listened to the pastor coordinate emergency lodging for them, I was in awe. How was he able to do this so quickly? How did he work it out with his church to coordinate such an effort? I asked him about it as soon as he was off the phone. Vicente is a mutual friend of ours, a community activist—working with local immigrants. The pastor told me, “You gotta do whatchya gotta do. Vicente knows I’m here for him. This family would be on the streets otherwise.” I sat baffled, speechless. Here is an African-American Pastor of a historic church giving shelter to immigrants in a time when it is highly unpopular to do so. We had just visited several sites on the trip already, hearing story after story of how the freed people of the South had to fight for the right to exist—and I was seeing how easily this pastor ran to the aid of others fleeing persecution and oppression in their home countries. And how he did so unapologetically. I had a lot to learn from this pastor, and the others I had surrounded myself with this past week, how to love when it seems there is no more love to give.

As we look at this scripture, the story of Jesus helping the man suffering from seizures, I would like us to focus on two statements. In Mark 9:23 Jesus says, “Everything is possible for one who believes.” Then in verse 29 he says, “This one can only come out by prayer.” Both profound conclusions that, I believe, illuminate our current intersection between faith, prayer, and action. It is interesting in this story because the father of the afflicted child came to the followers of Jesus. That would be us, in the story. The people asking us for help but for some reason or another we simply cannot do it. There are obstacles in our way, personally, and as a community—perhaps structures, systems, or simply lack of faith. Jesus highlights this in his response, “Everything is possible for one who believes.” The question then comes down to “Do you believe?” This would represent the first road at our three-way intersection. Faith is a funny thing. It can make us look spiritual or it can make us look foolish. When people step out in faith, without perhaps having all the answers, to some they will appear brave and admirable, and to others they will appear haphazard and naïve. But to do nothing, seems clearly uncaring. And this pastor was doing something, without the press, without the fanfare, in secret. He put the integrity of his church, their legacy, on the line.

Jesus, then heals the boy. Jesus took action. After faith, comes the action itself. Jesus didn't sit around and watch the boy suffer. He did something about it. Often times we are spectators to the suffering all around us, and perhaps faith is our obstacle—we struggle to commit to believe that we simply need to step out to do something, even when not having all the answers. When the African Americans stepped out to walk to Montgomery from Selma Alabama, and they saw the “sea of blue” referring to the police that stood to stop them as they cross the Edmund Pettis bridge, they knew it would cost them everything—as they were beaten and chased and even shot at by police. However, without the right to vote, they felt they had nothing. As the African American community of Birmingham faced a wall built around them in regards to being able to vote, their own children took to the streets and faced water cannons and billy clubs. Desperation trumps faith. It reminded me of the original partnership that this church made with Jackson Street in the late 1960s in the creation of the Kum Ba Yah Association, which would eventually birth what is now Interfaith Outreach. In those days, and I'd like to think today, we still embrace the motto: It's better to be wrong than asleep. Could this have the pastor of Jackson Street then, Rev James Pannel, talking to our spiritual leader then, Rev. Bev Cosby—on that bus going through Alabama, though it was Rev. Chandler talking to me? Maybe so.

However, while the roads of faith and action intersect, there is a third. Prayer. Jesus said, “This kind can come out only by prayer.” There are tasks in this world, problems that must be solved, that will require much prayer. Much contemplation, much intercession, and much centering. But this doesn't mean no action, no faith. On the contrary, it requires all three components. This pastor on the bus exemplified just that. Without hesitation, he acted on faith, and walking in prayer, but didn't stall, didn't balk, didn't wait. He just did it. He told me. “This is what God requires of us.” After I asked him, how were you able to pull this off so quickly. Church of the Covenant, our community of faith has a long history of doing exactly as Pastor Chandler: Acting on faith in prayer. I ask you to listen with open hearts as Vicente Gonzalez, a friend and community advocate, comes up to share what some of those needs look like. He is the one who was talked about while on a heavy, reflective, and powerful Civil Rights tour in the heart of the deep South. He was the one doing, and Pastor Chandler was doing it with him.