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Pastor Jim Mead  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

## *It's Your Call* Matthew 22: 36-40

What a joy it is for me to be back in your pulpit again. And a privilege, too. Carolyn and I have been back since April 1, though you might not have seen us. We volunteered in "Sky" Day Camp. Worshipped some, but preaching other places some, too. I love retirement—and I'm good at it. I've had lots more time to engage my favorite pastime: being with Carolyn and our family. We love working together to bring order out of chaos on our 1.5 unruly acres. I'm playing a little golf, and enjoying having more time for reading and music. We've traveled a bunch: Mexico with friends from CHPC, Hawaii, and twice to see family in Los Angeles. I'm doing some consulting with other congregations. And this is our home church. I'll be volunteering with the confirmation class with Jessica this coming year, meeting with Pastor Mark for breakfast every month or so, and doing academic mentoring with Ellis. All of it is a joy.

Well, our scripture passage is a familiar one: it's the Great Commandment and the second one that is like it. I chose this passage because it's so helpful to us in getting our calling in Christ straight—it helps us get it down to what is basic and simple, which seemed like a good way to wrap up this sermon series.

Read Matthew 22: 36-40

Back in the day, when I was a little older than Ellis and doing youth ministry, every winter or spring a few kids in the youth group would come with anxious questions about what God was calling them to do about college. Generally speaking, it was usually the most pious/spiritual kids who came with this particular anxiety. It often ran something like this. "Jim, I just don't know which college to attend. What does God want me to do? I've been accepted at University of Oregon and Oregon State, and Portland State. But which one does God want me to attend." I'd say, "Cool—congrats on being accepted so many places. Have you prayed about it?" "Yes." "Good for you. What are you hearing?" "Nothing!" Eventually I began saying this to them, "Well, what if God doesn't care which school you go to? What if God's just fine with U of O, OSU or Portland State?" Some kids were horrified, "What?! How can that be? I just want to be where I know God wants me to be." "Glad to hear that," I'd say. "But maybe what God wants is that whatever school you go to you behave as though you belong to Jesus while you are there: live Jesus' way and be a good learner. If God wants

you to go to one specific school, he'll find a way to get you there—closing doors, opening doors, speaking to you while you pray, sending you a messenger. But God probably doesn't care which school you go to so long as you love him and live Jesus' way while you are there."

So, what do you think of that advice? Does it sound impious—unspiritual—to you? Does it sound like good theology, or is it deeply troubling somehow? One of my daughters-in-love has always grappled seriously about spiritual things, and years ago I told her that story. This year she told me, "Dad, I have to tell you, I just hated hearing that." But, she gets what I'm trying to say now.

There are lots of reasons I've told you that story in this last "It's Your Call" sermon. Let's begin with this: it is a clear illustration about the primary call of God, and helps us get the secondary call of God in perspective. The primary call of God is, well, primary. It's the one that's first, the one that matters most. It's the one that is a good general purpose—all purpose—call. For nearly all of us nearly all of the time, it's the call we'd better remember and live into—it's the one we'd better work most at, and not fall to the temptation to focus on other, "special" callings.

So, what is the primary call? We've heard it from Pastors Mark and Jeremy about a zillion times in all the sermons we've heard about God's call—and I've read or heard them all. God's call is to be with God. To be in Christ. It is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, as the Great Commandment says, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. I like to say God's call is to love God, to live Jesus' way in Jesus' world, and to participate in what God is doing everywhere we are—home, school, work, neighborhood, playing somewhere. That's God's call to you. As Mark said, that call comes to us from outside of us. We don't get to make it up, improve on it; it isn't our job to decide on it, or to discern it or to figure it out. It is a given. Our job is to receive it and live into it. It's God's call to you, and if we're looking for a big call to make us feel important and special, that primary call is more than you and I will ever get completely right. It's big, it's a challenge. And it's just the right calling however old you are, wherever you are, whatever you are doing. Nearly all of the time, there isn't anything else to ask about God's call. Always, the question is, "How do I love God and do things Jesus' way right now, with these people right here?"

It's interesting: we tend to think that God's call to us must be special, something made just for us, that perfectly fits our spiritual gift profile; something that only WE could do—out of all the people on the planet who belong to Jesus, there is no one else who could get that done for the Lord. Really?? You know, beloved, that's a very American, or more precisely "Western Civilization-y" way for us to think. And, somehow, it's so evangelical-sounding, so spiritual. But what exactly would be the biblical support for that view? It's not true any more than it's true that in all the world there is just one mate for you---that one special woman, that one man, that God has picked for you. Please. God could do that, and sometimes even

does. But thinking that way means that I had better find that exact person, that exact calling, that perfect fit. Lots of Christians are filled with anxiety about finding that exact, perfect, will of God. Please, don't quote Jeremiah 29:11 to me—"I know the plans I have for you"—that passage we find comforting that is so overworked and so seriously misused among sweet Christians. God does have a plan for your life, but it's not mysterious, it's obvious, and it's personal but not unique: belong to him in Jesus, live Jesus' way, participate with God in bringing everything under Jesus' Lordship. That's God's plan for you. And, of course, you ARE special: God knows your name, loves you, has called you to belong to himself in Christ Jesus, wants you to be part of what he's doing in the world, and Jesus has gone on to heaven and prepared a place for you. You are special, and God's primary call on your life matters. Nothing could be bigger, nothing could be more precious, than that. And, you'll need God's help every step of the way—his help through the Spirit, through the Christian community of people who are living Jesus' way and doing Jesus' will in the world daily.

It's very interesting that the primary call is so vast and so challenging, and yet some of us are spending lots of time thinking about, trying to find and answer the secondary call. It's interesting, and misplaced energy. It produces anxiety in some of us. And it tends to fill others of us with pride: look at my wonderful calling in Christ—only I and I alone could do this! We forget Balaam's donkey: when God had a message that no one else would deliver, God had a donkey deliver the message. Jesus said God could raise up stones to shout his praises. Get over it! It doesn't all depend on you!

So, here's my shot for you about the secondary calling. God may have something specific for you to do. But maybe not. Maybe God's secondary calling in your life is way less mysterious than we think. Something right close at hand—so close that we don't even see it most of the time. So close, as we say, that if it were a snake, it would've bitten us. But since it seems so ordinary, so like what everyone else is doing, we just miss it altogether.

Here's how to get started getting in touch with key parts of God's secondary calling in your life. Take a moment right now, if you will, and ask God to help you call to mind the areas of influence you have. Close your eyes, please, and come into God's presence. Ask God's help to recall the relationships you have, the people who are counting on you. Picture their faces: husband, wife, children, grandkids, nieces and nephews, uncles and aunts, parents; the kid next door, the elderly folks down the street, your mom and dad back east, the person who works next to you or on the same team; your boss, the people who report to you. Where do you meet them? Where do they live? Think of the places you go week by week: home, school, work, recreation, neighborhood; don't forget church—the children and youth, the couples and singles, the elderly, the young. Ask the Lord to bring one person to your mind, or one place. Pray with me, please: "Lord, you have called me to belong to you in Jesus. Thank you. Help me to love you when I'm with that person, or in that place. Help me to do things your way, Jesus, when I

am with them. Help me to love them as you do. Use me to bring them to you, to help them know you and love you, too. Amen.”

Our call is to love God with all you've got, to live Jesus' way and be part of what Jesus is doing in every one of those places, with those people, with the Spirit's help. That's true—and it's not entirely useful to try to divide that up into primary and secondary callings, I think. To be absolutely clear: are you married? There are not many callings more first than that, more demanding, more life-giving—not many that can be a better witness for Christ. If you are married, you have a do or die secondary calling. And, if you are married, that is a calling that only you can do: no one can be married to your spouse for you, no one can love God in his or her presence for you, no one can live Jesus' way with him or her for you. God is calling you to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, to let the way you are married point people to God's saving love in Jesus; let your relationship show that grace is amazing, that God forgives, that Christians hold each other accountable for their behavior, that Jesus' blood can break down the walls of hostility that separate us, that we are one flesh and that no one should divide what God has joined. If you are married, you already have a secondary calling: being married Jesus' way. You don't have to go looking for some “truly special” call to give your life to—you already have a truly special calling if you are married.

Are you a parent? You don't need to agonize and beseech the Lord to reveal your one special calling to you. You have a crucial calling. Your calling is to raise children who love God with all they've got, know how to live Jesus' way in Jesus' world and participate with God in what he's doing everywhere they go. You don't need to spend hours in prayer, don't need to consult your spiritual gifts profile: you are called to raise disciples of Jesus. For as long as you live, for as long as your children live: it's your call! And, no one can do that for you. No one can be your child's Christian dad or mom in your place. God can raise up other people to bring your kid to Christ if you don't, but no one can be their Christian dad or mom but you. There are very few things that matter more or that are more demanding—you can't do it without God—God makes disciples of Jesus, but your job is to partner up with God so that your kids follow Jesus for a lifetime. Please note that this call doesn't end when your kids graduate from high school. When Carolyn and I were in Pittsburgh, we missed our kids and our grandkids, of course. But more than that, we knew that our calling to serve the Lord in Pittsburgh Presbytery was seriously limiting our calling as parents and grandparents, and we knew our families needed us. So, we asked the Lord if we could be done in Pittsburgh and be with our families. To everything there is a season, says Ecclesiastes, and the Lord said our season in Pittsburgh was coming to an end and that he was going to send us back to be with our families. A year and a half later, we were here at Chapel Hill.

Are you an adult with aging parents? You don't have to agonize in prayer about your secondary call. The fifth commandment is clear: honor your father and mother. Nearly all of Carolyn and my friends have aging parents. It's no easy

thing. Both our moms are wrestling with diminishing capabilities. My mom has been a widow for over 20 years, she has macular degeneration and is effectively blind in one eye. She still drives, still runs her own home with the help of a housekeeper, still does her own bills, still works out every day, still leads two Bible study groups and still brings people to Jesus. But, the little woman who walked so quickly I couldn't keep up with her when I was little now walks with difficulty, a bad knee making her pay for every step. We got her to Disneyland this summer in a wheelchair—she was perseverant and we were thoughtful and we all had a good time. And, if mom doesn't die at 88 years-young, then her world will keep getting smaller as her capacities diminish. My sister is the primary person making good on the 5th commandment; but Carolyn and I know that we are called to be part of my mom's life. Our retirement years are not all about us and the fun we have and the places we finally have the freedom to go—but our retirement includes being more free to be there for our aging folks. Here is a picture of my mom and her great grandchildren, and here is a shot of the 88th birthday party Carolyn gave her mom with the most of her clan present. Our retirement includes our children, our grandchildren, our parents, our remaining aunts and uncles and being Christ's disciples together and for each other. And, friends some golf, working in the yard, traveling, preaching and volunteering at church, and the joys of reading and music.

Then, just a few important thoughts about church ministry callings. Some people wonder, "Am I called to teach Sunday school or not?" Do you have to have a special call from God to do it? No—for heaven sake, no! We need hundreds of volunteers to make children's ministries go this coming year. Lots and lots of us could do that. It doesn't have to be a special call of God that we discern after fasting and prayer, and it doesn't have to match our spiritual gift inventory perfectly. We need teachers—if you are willing to love children, help them learn to know and love God and live Jesus' way, you'd probably make a great teacher. Deb Robertson and her crew will help you do that for Jesus for kids—and if you aren't up to teaching, they'll tell you, and help you find something you can do for kids.

One more application, please. I want to talk about work as an ordinary arena of our secondary calling—a living out of our belonging to God in Christ. Pastor Mark did a marvelous job talking about honor in all vocations. You remember him telling about the guy who got their sewage grinder working again? Very spiritual! But great stuff—as usual from Mark. Most Christians don't really have a calling in their work life. A few do: my friend Sally Barrett says, "God put me here to be a kindergarten teacher." And, without doubt she is called to that the way I was called to be a pastor. But most of us just have jobs—fancy ones with perks and high salaries, and mundane ones that just pay the bills. But our primary calling is to love God and love our neighbors and to live Jesus' way and be part of what Jesus is doing everywhere. And that includes our jobs. Can the people you work with tell you belong to Jesus? I don't mean, "Did you buttonhole them about where they would spend eternity"? I mean, can they tell you belong to Jesus

because of the jokes you tell and laugh at, because of the way you treat people, because you give a fair day's work for a fair day's pay? Are you someone they can come to in order to hear what is godly, true and right and good? Would they turn to you for understanding and help? Can you be trusted? Do you make work a safer place to be—for women, for younger and older employees, for minorities? Are you honest? Or, are you just in it for the money—you do what you have to to get your check, and that's that? If so, what are you going to tell Jesus when you make an accounting of your life? Your work, what you do, how you do it, how you treat other workers and customers is part of your essential calling in Christ: do it his way, showing you love God and loving others the way you ought to love yourself.

Let me be clear. I know that God sometimes has a very specific call for some of us. When I was in my early 20's God called me to go to seminary, and I went, and then he called me to the church as a pastor. But, can we be clear: those calls were secondary, not primary. The primary call is to God in Christ. God called the Derr family to go to Africa, and they went. Sometimes God's calling even involves suffering—sharing in the suffering of Jesus for the world, and sometimes it even involves putting your family at risk, sometimes your children will pay the price of God's call on your life—my children did. So, I get it about specific secondary callings—they are real and precious.

So, dear people, if God has something specific he wants you to do, then for heaven's sake you'd better say yes, even if it's costly. Read the book of Jonah if you doubt that. God had a very specific call for Jonah—and Jonah could run from God but he couldn't hide, and he couldn't escape God's call. We are not told, by the way, that Jonah was the ONLY person in the whole world who could do that call. That's baloney: God could have called anyone to preach the message of repentance—after all, God got his message communicated through Balaam's donkey when no one else would speak up for God. It isn't Jonah who converted Ninevah, it was God! But God had made up his mind that out of all the Jews in the world Jonah was going to be the preacher who carried the message of repentance to that wicked city. And after being spit up on the beach by the whale, Jonah gave in and did what God had called him to do. Moses went to Pharaoh, Mary conceived a child while she was still a virgin. But the call most of us had better not run away from is probably way closer to home: my kids, my aging parents, the kids at school, the people I work with, my neighbors, the people I'm in ministry to at church.

There is a lot of freedom in Christ as we go about our daily living: being married, raising children who are followers of Jesus, loving our parents, being neighbors, working, being in ministry at church. For most of us, most of the time, that is our secondary calling. You don't need a spiritual gifts inventory to tell you that. But you will need God's help. Here's a blessing from God to take with you as you answer his call.

## Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **DIG DEEPER**

1. See whether anyone can recall what Pastors Mark and Jeremy have said is the primary call. It's not something we "do." Our primary call is . . . . (If no one can recall, you can go online and get it from pretty much every one of the sermons.)

2. Our secondary call may be specific, like God's call to the pastorate or the mission field. One of Pastor Jim's friends said her calling was to be a kindergarten teacher. Make a list of some of the very specific secondary calls you know of in friends and members of CHPC.

3. Sometimes our secondary call is right in front of us, but we don't see it because it seems ordinary. Like being a Christian parent, spouse, or friend. What are your current areas of influence? Each person share several.

4. What is it God is calling you to do in your calling to the things you listed in #3? What gifts do you have to help you live into that call? What new behavior will you take up this week or this year to live into that calling?