

MESSAGE – 18TH PENTECOST
MATTHEW 9:9-13
OCTOBER 13, 2019

“TWO VERY VITAL WORDS”

Helmut Thielicke was a 20th century German pastor and teacher of the church. To his students he wrote something called “*A Little Exercise for Young Theologians.*” He said “*theology... takes into account the fact that God has spoken, and that now what God has spoken is to be understood and answered. But it can only be understood when (I) recognize that what has been said is directed to me, and (I) become involved in formulating a reply.*”

To underscore what he meant – that the Word of God is a word to me (and to you), Pastor Thielicke reminded his young theologians of the danger of speaking of God (as is our habit) in the third person, and of hearing God only insofar as it helps us (pastors) formulate a sermon. He said “*consider that the first time someone spoke of God in the third person and therefore no longer with God but about God was the very moment when the question resounded (in Genesis 3:1) “did God really say.”*”

Matthew heard God say “*follow me.*” A lot of people in the Bible heard God say “follow me” – or occasionally warn them “*do not follow other gods.*” The prophets of the Old Testament said it often on God’s behalf though in their case they were addressing an entire nation – Israel. But when in the Bible Jesus says “follow” it’s always quite personal. He said it to Peter and his brother Andrew, then to the sons of Zebedee James and John, then to Matthew. It’s worth noting that in the case of Peter – Jesus said it twice – perhaps as an example to us all that ‘follow’ is neither a ‘*one and done*’ event or a ‘*fail and you’re done*’ test.

Peter first heard it when Jesus was starting his ministry, when he (and his brother) became interested in imperfect disciples - students. It wasn’t just intellectual curiosity or religious optimism that kept Peter following for the next three years, but it wasn’t exactly life changing either, not in the way it was when he heard Jesus say it to him a second time, after the resurrection, after his threefold denials in case you’ve forgotten. Then those “*two words*” (five consonants, three vowels and three syllables) wrung the shame out of Peter – those denials having already taken care of the pride safe to say.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once famously said “*when Jesus calls a (person), he bids him come and die.*” At the risk of sounding disrespectful to one of 20th century’s most important Christian witnesses (and martyrs), Bonhoeffer’s statement is only half true – it has to be only half true. Jesus is alive even though his Father bid him come and die. Amazing frankly, but God really loves you as much as his own Son, which is precisely why he says “follow me”, so you would learn what life as it was meant to be lived really feels like. AMEN

