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Called To Be Disciples

2 Thessalonians 2:14

2 Thessalonians is written to a people who are living through anxious times. The letter says they are beside themselves with fear. Their world is changing and they don't know what to make of it. The familiar boundaries that have defined their lives are breaking down. Worst of all their fledgling church is threatened by a culture that is growing increasingly hostile. At the heart of their fear is the concern that the future of the church is very much in doubt.

The writer of the letter assures the Thessalonians that they need not live in fear for themselves or for the church. God is the one who is destabilizing their world. God is intervening in history to break down an old worn out world so that a different kind of world may emerge. The key to overcoming their fear is learning to see what God is doing around them. God is inviting them to move beyond the comfortable structures which have defined their lives. In this new world they are called to be disciples who live not to please themselves but to please God.

In 1534 a talented young man named John Calvin was struggling with his fear in the face of a rapidly changing world. For some years Calvin had been on a path to priesthood in the church. He had been on the payroll of the cathedral in his hometown of Noyon while he completed his education. It was expected that he would be ordained by the age of 25. Several months before his 25th birthday Calvin was in a state of crisis about his future. He believed that he was called to serve God but he was confused about which path he should take.

His problem was that for some years he had been a follower of a group of men who were trying to reform the French church from within. They advocated a new form of spirituality based on preaching and teaching from the scriptures. These were well educated men who held prominent positions in the church and in universities. They enjoyed the patronage of the sister of the French King. These moderate reformers rejected the radicals who had left the church and attacked the Papal system.

Calvin also rejected the radicals, one of whom was his landlord. Calvin rented a room in Paris from a cloth merchant who would later be burned at the stake for renouncing the authority of the Pope. But Calvin's moderate stance was shaken in 1533 and 1534 when his mentors also came under attack from church and secular authorities. Some were imprisoned. Others were burned at the stake. Many were forced into exile. A few of their more prominent leaders were sheltered by the sister of the King, Marguerite d'Angoulême at her palace at Nérac in Aquitaine region of France. Calvin traveled there in 1534 for an interview with the leader of the moderates, a biblical scholar named Lefevre d'Étaples. Historian John T. McNeill describes their meeting in these words:

Whether or not Lefevre sought to evoke on Calvin's part a resolute course of behavior, the situation cannot have failed to impress upon Calvin the futility of cautious methods. It must have come upon his mind with irresistible conviction that, with their inspirer very aged and in forced retirement, those reforming spirits who scrupulously remained within the Roman communion and subject to its hierarchy would assuredly

never gain the reforms they sought. Not only a few Sorbonne reactionaries but the whole weight of the established Church of France and of Rome opposed them. Obedience to the ecclesiastical authorities was itself the frustration of reform (*The History and Character of Calvinism*, page 114).

We don't know what was said in that meeting, but it changed the course of Calvin's life. He went from there to the Cathedral in his hometown of Noyon to return his church salary and tell the authorities he would not become a priest. Calvin left his security blanket behind. He stepped into a future that was filled with uncertainty and risk believing that God was creating something new. From this moment he understood that his call to discipleship was not about pleasing himself. It was about pleasing God.

In the 20th chapter of Luke Jesus affirms this understanding of discipleship. He is confronted by people who are intent on making him look foolish and thereby undermining his authority as a teacher. The Sadducees have come to ask him a question. They conjure up an absurd scenario by which a woman is widowed and remarried seven times. They ask, "In the resurrection therefore whose wife will the woman be (Luke 20:33a)?"

This is a trick question which is guaranteed to make Jesus look like a fool for believing in the resurrection. Jesus does not answer the question. Instead he challenges the assumptions that lie behind it. The questioner assumes that if there is a resurrection, the woman will belong to somebody in it. Jesus lived in a world where husbands had property rights over their wives. The Sadducees assumed that the life to come would conform to this arrangement. Issues of property rights would have to be settled.

By challenging this assumed world Jesus creates a new and more gracious world for the woman. But he also invites his listeners to move beyond systems that are based on pleasing ourselves. Disciples are called to experience another kind of joy; the joy that comes from pleasing God.