

Answering the Call
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Opening Chapel—Spring Semester
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It is my privilege as president to speak in the first chapel of every term. Each semester brings change, and with it a sense of anticipation and hope: new faces in the student body, new relationships, new opportunities. Yet there are some things in each semester that don't change. Each fall, you hear the freshmen question, "what's your major?" Each spring, the question belongs to seniors, "what are you going to do after you graduate?"

Those are fair questions. Your parents sent you here to learn something, so when you leave here you can do something. We are in the business of education because of questions like that. The development of curriculum, the teaching of classes, the reading, writing and reflection, the completion of a course of study, all are part of the pursuit of a college degree.

Yet this is not the totality of the NNU experience.

I want to use this time, at the start of the spring semester, for some review. For you see, you have come to a particular place—Northwest Nazarene University—with unique mission.

We, the assembled faculty and university staff of NNU are not here to merely provide you the requisite knowledge necessary to get you a college degree and wish you well. We believe there is more to college. Said another way, we believe there is more to life.

You may be thinking, "All I want to know is whether or not I should buy, rent or borrow my last textbook for the term." But I am here to tell you, you have enrolled in a different kind of place. This is not a "punch the student time clock in order to get a degree" University. I want us to drill down and remember who we are and what it means to be here at Northwest Nazarene University.

The mission of Northwest Nazarene University is the transformation of the whole person. Centered in Jesus Christ the NNU education instills habits of heart, soul, mind and strength to enable each student to become God's creative and redemptive agent in the world.

To study here is more than the mere acquisition of a degree. We are a people with a sense of calling; this morning I want to talk about *Answering the Call*.

Said another way, I want us to remember who we are created to be and what we are called to be. In sharing my thoughts on this matter I draw from scripture, from Os Guinness and his work, *The Calling: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your*

Life, and N.T. Wright and his book, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*. In these works the authors remind the reader, the Christian reader, that we are made in the image of God, and it is God's intent that we be both disciple and servant; a people who worship God and a people engaged in the mission of God.

I believe we are here, as a university, to help you understand that dual purpose in life, and equip you to live it out in the world. Two icons help make my point:

A Telephone, An Instrument

Let's start with the phone.

Answering the Call—Follow Me

Each and every one of us is called by God. We may think we are the ones doing the searching, seeking. But you and I need to remember, we are not on some aimless quest. Before we began seeking, someone was seeking us. Calling us. That someone is God.

We are called to be in relationship with God. In the fullness of time God has called out to us in the person of His Son, Jesus the Christ. Jesus calls people to come follow Him.

Remember this life-changing exchange?

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.
Matthew 9: 9

Here is what we all need to remember. This call is not reserved for twelve disciples, or saints, or church leaders, or religion majors. Jesus calls everyone. Come. Follow me. Become my disciple.

The call of Christ on your life is the most important call of all. Here at NNU, I am confident that the majority of us have answered the call of Jesus. Yet I know, in a school this size, an audience this large, there are those who have not yet answered Christ's call. We have ordered and organized the university in such a way that we want to walk alongside you as you weigh the call of Jesus. It's a brave thing, to get up and follow Him—its transformative.

Sound familiar?

We believe that to answer the call of Jesus is to submit yourself to the transformation of the whole person. Not only are we here to form scholars, we are here to nurture disciples. To be committed to transformation is to be engaged in the building of character.

Wright says it this way, “Character is transformed by three things. First, you have to aim at the right goal. Second, you have to figure out the steps you need to take to get to that goal. Third, those steps have to become habitual, a matter of second nature.” [Wright, p. 29] And it’s “not just any old sort of character, either, but a particular sort: the sort Jesus was urging and modeling—the character of patience, humility, and above all generous, self-giving love. . . you don’t get that character just by trying. You get it by following Jesus.” [Wright, p. 49] We invite you to join us in the pursuit of Christian character, what we call Christian holiness.

If becoming like Jesus seems humanly impossible, that’s because it is. The call of Jesus to follow Jesus is made possible by Jesus. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, linked to our own obedient efforts, we are learning to answer the call of Jesus, to become like Jesus.

Let me ask you, how much of your time this semester will you spend seeking to be like Jesus? You must intentionally, habitually, pursue him, in private and in groups of fellow-believers—from the corporate worship of chapel, to Abide groups. I pray we will learn to answer His call to follow Him.

I said earlier there are two calls. I need to let you in on a scary secret. If you choose to get up and follow Jesus, He expects more than belief in Him, He expects His disciples to live for Him.

Os Guinness says it this way, “God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested . . . as a response to [God’s] summons and service.” [Guinness, p. 29] Belief in Jesus, becoming like Jesus, lead to action for Jesus.

God calls us who believe to answer the call to action. Disciples become servants of their Lord. Remember those in the scriptures whose lives were defined by their willingness to serve God when called.

Remember young Samuel—“Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Remember Isaiah the prophet—“Here am I Lord, send me.”

Remember the young virgin named Mary—“Here I am, the servant of the Lord.”

Let’s consider the one we call the Apostle Paul. Remember, prior to his conversion he was Saul, a Jewish zealot attacking the followers of Jesus.

As he [Saul] was nearing Damascus on this mission, a brilliant light from heaven suddenly beamed down upon him! He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?”

“Who are you, sir?” Saul asked.

And the voice replied, “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, “Ananias!”

“Yes, Lord!” he replied.

The Lord said, Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you arrive ask for Saul of Tarsus. He is praying to me right now.

“But Lord, “Exclaimed Ananias, “I’ve heard about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem!”

But the Lord said [to Ananias], “Go and do what I say. For Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel.” Acts 9: 3-6, 10, 11, 13, 15

Answer the Call—Be My Instrument

Let’s take that in for a moment. Listen to what the Lord said, “Saul is my chosen instrument”. You come to college pursuing a major, with a career, a vocation in mind. Yet we do well to realize, God not only calls us to follow Him, God wants to calibrate what we do so that we do it for Him and for the good of His Kingdom.

Listen to words penned by Paul as he spoke from the experience of being chosen as God’s instrument.

Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to its lustful desires. Do not let any part of your body become a tool of wickedness, to be used for sinning. Instead, give yourselves completely to God since you have been given new life. And use your whole body as a tool to do what is right for the glory of God. Romans 6: 12, 13

Several chapters later these familiar words:

Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is. Romans 12: 2

Earlier I joked about the two recurrent college questions, “What are you going to major in?” and “What are you going to do when you graduate?” But those are real questions aren’t they? They stick around because they’re important questions. How to choose a major, how to identify a potential career path, are hard, important decisions. You might even say, they are best answered with a sense of calling.

In coming to NNU you have come to a place that doesn’t calculate your worth as a person, or a college graduate, in terms of your value to society as an economic unit of measure. To declare a major here is to consider the question, “how will the skills and abilities I acquire enable me to use my gifts and aptitudes to serve the cause of Christ?”

We want to help you, prepare you, for service. So choose well, your major and your vocational aspirations—they are more than your finite interests, they are how God seeks to equip you to become His instrument.

Os Guinness says, “The notion of calling, or vocation, is vital to each of us because it touches on the modern search for a basis for individual identity and an understanding of humanness itself.” [Guinness, p. 22]

Since most of us don’t have the catastrophic luxury of a blinding light and the voice of Jesus from heaven telling us how we are going to become God’s instrument in the world, here are some helpful hints, for the consideration of a God-inspired, earnestly sought after major and vocational path:

- God normally calls us where we are gifted
- Be honest with yourself, learn to assess your strengths truthfully
- Don’t assume that your first choice is the right choice, you can, and probably will have more than one career path in your life
- Seek the counsel of wise people—family, friends and professors
- Seek God’s guidance
- Remember not all callings last a life time, and some seasons of life prepare us for future callings
- Don’t ever make your career your god. It is your service of worship to God.
- Beware of pride if you’re doing well
- Beware of sloth if you’re doing poorly

To be available as God’s willing instrument, yielded to Him, eager to serve Him while seeking Him, is where God wants us to be. The fact of the matter is, in some seasons of our lives we will be successful in the eyes of the world. In other times, though the world may not take notice, what we are doing will be a sweet aroma before the throne of God.

Consider the life of Mother Teresa. Born in 1910 in Albania, the young lady who would one day be known as Mother Teresa felt early God’s call upon her life. Taking orders as a sister in the church she spent 19 years teaching in Calcutta, India. It was near the end of that span of time, at age 40, that she sensed, what she termed “a call within a call”. She felt led of the Lord to leave the teaching ministry and devote herself to the poor and dying of Calcutta.

Over the years, God used her to focus the attention of the world on the outcast of this teeming city. Eventually she formed her own order, the Missionaries of Charity, sisters who had previously been her teaching colleagues and students, now joined her in caring for the dying and destitute. Together they picked up over 54,000 people from the streets of Calcutta. 23,000 of whom died in their caring arms.

In 1989, Mother Teresa was interviewed by Time Magazine. Here are several key excerpts:

Time: Do your work and spiritual life become easier with time?

MT: Yes, the closer we come to Jesus, the more we become the work. Because you know to whom you are doing it, with whom you are doing it and for whom you are doing it. That is very clear. That is why we need a clean heart to see God.

MT: I don't claim anything of the work. It's His work. I'm like a little pencil in His hand. That's all. He does the thinking. He does the writing. The pencil has nothing to do with it. The pencil has only to be allowed to be used. In human terms, the success of our work should not have happened, no? That is a sign that it's His work, and that He is using others as instruments—all our Sisters. None of us could produce this. Yet see what He has done.

So here we are, at the start of the semester. Let's take a moment to breathe in the magnitude and privilege of the enterprise we share.

You, we, are a called people. Called by Jesus to be in loving fellowship with God. That is our first, primary calling.

Yet there is a second calling issued to us by our sovereign Lord and Savior. We are called to go out and become God's creative and redemptive agents in the world.

These callings are fulfilled best in community. We are summoned by God to follow Him both individually and corporately. Together we best learn the habits of Christian virtue and the pursuit of the Christ-like life. This is what we aspire for NNU to be, "a community that learns together the lessons of holiness, and that learns as well what it means to reflect God's character and actions to one another."

[Wright, p. 217]

Together we can discover how and where God is needing and using his disciples as Kingdom instruments, and then offer our best stewardship as students, professors and staff to be equipped to do the work of Jesus as we live together in relationship with Jesus.

I hope as we recently concluded our Centennial celebration you noticed the varied impact of our alumni, men and women used by God to be His instruments around the world and across the street.

Paul reminds us of why we are all applying ourselves so diligently—student, scholar, disciple:

Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are all parts of his one body, and each of us has different work to do. And since we are all one body in Christ, we belong to each other, and each of us needs all the others. God has given each of us the ability to do certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out when you have faith that God is speaking through you. If your gift is that of serving others, serve them well. If

you are a teacher, do a good job of teaching. If your gift is to encourage others, do it! If you have money, share it generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly. Romans 12: 4, 5-8

I pray you have a fulfilling semester. May who you are, what you seek and what you do, be an act of worship and an act of service to our Lord Jesus Christ.

I'd like to conclude by singing Eternal Life—the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi:

Eternal Life

*Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace:
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand,
To be loved as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

Recommended Reading:

Os Guinness. *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003.

N.T. Wright. *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*. New York: HarperOne, 2010.