

THE CALL OF BETHANY

Part 3: Empower

John 1:26-34; 11:1-6, 17-46

Bethany Church

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Did you ever ask your parents about your name? I did. My parents intended to name me “John Wesley Gabel.” However, they changed their mind and reversed the names at the last minute. That alteration proved enormously influential; for every time I heard my name, I was reminded of my common identity with the evangelist, pioneer and reformer named John Wesley. As I grew up, people challenged me to live a life worthy of the name. Those comments provoked in me a consciousness, as early as age 4, that I had a special calling. The Holy Spirit tugged at me and sowed passion in my heart through the gift of my name.

We can betray our call and squander the gift of our names, but God’s plan is embedded in this gift that is provided us. In my parent’s home each of my siblings learned the meaning and reason for their name, and those names have profoundly shaped their values, goals and conduct.

Similarly, God has a plan for the church of Rochester and a specific destiny for each congregational subunit within it. We became Bethany of Rochester for a specific

reason. We noted over the past weeks that scholars see two meanings in our name. They see Bethany both as the *House of Dates*, which speaks of refreshment and restoration, and as the *House of Unripe Figs*, which focuses on our development. We observed that the spiritual history of Israel's Bethany involved encounters with Christ that brought people to their knees in worship. Bethany was not about a single, proper way to worship.

Bethany offered encounters that cause stubbornly monotheistic Jews to fall on their faces and worship Jesus as Lord and prompted a woman to empty a \$50,000 pint of perfume on Jesus' head and feet in gratitude. Bethany was a place of life-changing encounters and heartfelt worship. At Bethany wounded people were restored. At Bethany ordinary people discovered they had extraordinary potential and began to realize it. Bethany was a community about restoration and realization, restoration from "woundedness" and realization of potential.

However, we as a church are not Bethany of Israel. We are Bethany of Rochester. Our calling is shaped by both the nation and the city in which we are located. We are to contribute to God's plan and purpose for our nation and community; for both our nation and community are not products of chance. There is a divine reason for both, and clues to our national and community purpose are embedded in such things as our name, our history and our demographics.

The United States is a nation of immigrants. Scientists believe that even the earliest inhabitants, the American Indians, immigrated. The United States is the one country in the world where only a rainbow adequately describes the color of our skin. Most of us can imagine what a citizen of another country looks like. That's not true of an American. Our nation's and redemptive gift to the world is to reflect both the *diversity* and *unity* of heaven

Similarly, Bethany's calling is affected by the name, history and demographics of Rochester. When God led people to form the community of Rochester in this agricultural region, there was a divine purpose. Three divine calls became apparent as this community developed. One became apparent with the founding of the Mayo Clinic. We were to become a community of restoration for wounded and hurting people. The people of this community were to heal the sick and also host and refresh the families of those suffering. As the Mayo Clinic drew its staff and clientele internationally and as International Business Machines (IBM) located here, it became apparent that reconciliation among races was a part of God's purpose. Furthermore, Mayo Clinic and IBM both had a mission to equip and help other people realize their potential. Rochester's three calls are *restoration* of hurting people, *reconciliation* of divided people and *realization* of potential.

The demographics also tell us some other things about our call. There are various estimates of how many people live in Rochester. According to a recent study 96,149 residents have a Rochester Zip Code. I was surprised to learn that only 8% of Rochester's population is non-Anglo. That's 20% below the national average. A single parent leads seventeen percent of Rochester's households. That is 9% below the national average. One third of Rochester's residents have graduated from college. That is 13% above the national average. Finally, despite the diverse religious mix of Rochester, with Buddhists, Hindus, Moslems, Jews and Christians located here, 40% of our population have no faith involvement, which is 5% above the national average. Percentage-wise there are fewer practicing and growing Christians in Rochester than almost any other community in Minnesota.

Years ago when Bethany was founded, the assumption was that most your neighbors believed in Jesus. They may have grown up as Baptists, Catholics or Lutherans, but they believed. In that cultural mix, Bethany developed a slogan as a new mission. *“Come to Bethany. You’re welcome, wanted and needed.”* That slogan assumed that people already believed. It assumed that “people are Christians.” However, as people influenced by the assumptions of educational institutions increasingly settled in Rochester, its residents put more faith in laboratory coats than clerical collars. Today Christianity carries little influence, compared to the past, over the attitudes, goals and actions of the majority of Rochester residents. The average neighbor may have affection for Jesus and Christianity, but they have little faith in it all. They have been secularized. They need relationships and ministry that births faith in them.

As our culture put more trust in reason and education, the church adjusted. They made us leaders go to college and graduate school. We formed Sunday Schools, schools of mission, Bible schools and various classes. We assumed that we were making disciples when we educated people. In truth we were producing Christian intellectuals, educated believers, rather than disciples. We produced people who knew a lot about Jesus and the Bible, but not disciples who did the same ministry as Jesus. Yet Jesus commanded his followers to make disciples not intellectuals.

Another major change took root this past century. Technology came within a whisker of destroying us. Subsequently, our society’s confidence in Science and reason waned. In addition, we found that **we don’t see things as they are. We see things as we are.** We see what we are prepared to see. As a result, much of our population is

haunted by distrust, succumbing to relativism and exploring spiritualism. For example, since the 1980s, there have been more psychic healers in France than medical doctors. This is increasingly becoming an American phenomenon as well. In this milieu, churches are dying. Churches that assume people believe and that educate rather than equip their members decline. We are going through a period of change as profound and widespread as that which occurred with the Protestant Reformation. God is leading us into a new day, where the church is once again being reformed.

So how do we fit? Did you know that there were two places called Bethany in the Bible? The first place was a spot along the Jordan River. It was the place where people felt convicted of their sin and their need to repent, and where John the Baptist baptized them. Bethany was the place of turnarounds. Bethany was also the place of anointing. It was the setting where Jesus was empowered. It was the place where the Holy Spirit anointed him to serve and save his people. Bethany was the place of Jesus' anointing. He did no ministry until he was empowered at Bethany. How about you? God wants to anoint you to make a difference. Are we not to be your Bethany?

With the power Jesus received at the first Bethany, he ministered all over Israel. When he arrived at the second Bethany, the village by Jerusalem, that power stunned the world. Lazarus was raised from death. The Bethany of anointing led to the Bethany of miracles. Where do people go for miracles? Do they go to the clinic? Do they go to IBM? Why don't they go to Jesus? Is there no Bethany?

Our calling is to be that Bethany. Our calling in this new day is to be a new kind of church, a reformation church. It's to *embrace* and foster life-changing encounters with

Jesus Christ. It's to *expect* and pray for an anointing of the Holy Spirit that empowered Christ and will empower us to minister to the deepest needs of our neighbors. It's to *equip* one another to do Jesus' ministry as his disciples. It's to partner with Jesus and *engage* and serve our neighbors who've yet to discover a reason to believe in Christ.

This is the call of Bethany. This is what God has been preparing us for. The pain you've had, the faith you've been given, the relationships God has given you were all in preparation for this pioneering mission. The Bible says:

...we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10, NIV).

God's is leading us to be the Bethany of anointing, where people are empowered, the Bethany of miracles, where people are healed, the Bethany of turnarounds, where people are changed forever.