

Three Meanings of Roll Call

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Roll Call Sunday at Harbor Church dates from the beginning of the previous century when the pastor decided to observe the church's anniversary by calling members to gather and to present gifts for the purchase of a new furnace. I think it's still a good thing to observe the anniversary of the formal organization of the church 245 years ago, and I still think it's a good thing to act as if membership *means* something. If you are a member, you are expected to be here and to answer when your name is called—according to our tradition, with a Bible verse or a word of testimony.

I want us to think this morning about three meanings of the term “roll call”—three contexts in which we picture roll calls happening.

For most of us, I suspect the first memory that comes to mind when someone mentions calling the roll is sitting in school. Don't you remember sitting at your desk in the first grade as the teacher took out her attendance book and began to call each name? It seemed to take forever to get to the H's; I couldn't have borne being named Young. All the time the other names are being called I am listening for my own. I am wondering whether to say “Here” or “Present” or something clever. I wonder how my voice will sound, if it will crack. Part of the message of all that was that going to school was really important. You couldn't just sit at home because you didn't feel like school. You couldn't mail it in.

When we call roll at church we are in a sense calling roll in a school. It's an underused image, I think. We prefer to think of church as a family, or a fellowship, in which our obligations are very loosely defined. But the church is also meant to be a school in which we learn from Jesus.

The primary task of the church, according to Jesus' commission before he ascended to heaven, is to make disciples. What is a disciple? The Greek word *mathetes* simply means “learner” or “pupil,” but when we translate it “disciple” it becomes a guy in a bathrobe walking a dusty path in Israel. In the time of Jesus, a disciple (*mathetes*) was a pupil of a rabbi or an apprentice of a Greek philosopher. When Jesus called his disciples to follow him, he was calling them to be his students, to enroll in his school, which meant traveling with him from village to village. What did Jesus do in those villages as the disciples observed him? Matthew 4:23 summarizes his ministry by saying that Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching, preaching, and curing. When people address Jesus, the most common title they give him is “Teacher.” Jesus says in Matthew 23:8, “You have one teacher, and you are all students.”

If we in the church are disciples of Jesus, then we are people who are learning from Jesus in order to become like him, in order to be able to do what he did. We are not just members of the Jesus Party who have to show up once a year to vote for him. We are not Jesus Alumni who finished his school when we are kids and now our only connection with the school is an occasional donation. We are students in the Jesus School; we go to school every day and we will never graduate.

Richard Bolles, the author of *What Color Is Your Parachute?*, wrote another book about “the three boxes of life.” He said that we often think of life as fitting into three boxes: education, work, and leisure. We tend to think of those as coming sequentially: first we get educated, then we work, and then if we are lucky we get leisure. But that's no way to live, he said. We want to

do all three things all the time—constantly learning, and working, and having fun. That’s what makes life good. Even in the church we tend to fall into the “three boxes” way of thinking, as if our education is something that happens in childhood or before confirmation—and certainly by the time we reach retirement we are done with learning.

We are never done with learning from Jesus. There is a line in Ephesians that has always struck me—Ephesians 4:20, where after talking about those who are self-indulgent Paul says “you did not so learn Christ.” Modern translations sometimes say “that is not the way of life you learned” but I like the literal rendering of learning Christ. We are always learning Christ. When Paul gives a testimony in Philippians 3 he says that he has given up everything so that he may know Christ, but it is not something in his past. Paul says, late in his ministry, “All I want is to know Christ,” then he says that he has not attained that goal, he is still reaching for it, straining toward it.

A church is a school with Jesus as its curriculum. I do not mean that I insist that you learn from me. I mean that if you are not learning from Jesus then we are failing in our most basic task. I am glad that you are here to learn something from the sermon on Sunday morning, but I worry that more of you are not interested in Bible study or discussion groups or any of the classes we come up with that are intended to help you in your spiritual growth. Maybe I need to understand better what your questions are, what you feel you need to learn. Maybe I need to recruit better teachers than myself. Maybe I need to point you to good books and mentors. But until I am convinced that every person who says Present to the roll call is actually learning, I will not be content.

Let’s stand and join in singing the first and last stanzas of the song *Teach Me Your Way, O Lord*.

A second meaning of “roll call” is the military sense. If you search Google images for roll call, most of the pictures that pop up will be pictures of soldiers standing in lines being inspected by their officers. I read that during the Civil War it was standard procedure to have roll call three times a day: at reveille in the morning, at retreat around sunset, and at tattoo (9-9:30 at night). If no one was missing, the corporal would say “All present and accounted for, sir.” Perhaps desertion was such a problem that the armies had to check for deserters three times a day. In church we seem to be reluctant to check the roll even once a year. We’d rather not know about the deserters in our ranks. Wouldn’t it be a great thing if one year on Roll Call Sunday we could say “All present and accounted for”?

There is a sense in which the church is an army and we are all soldiers in a battle. This kind of language bothers a good many people, including me, especially those who grew up during Vietnam with a suspicion of all things military. Some churches removed “Onward Christian Soldiers” and other hymns deemed militaristic from their hymnals. And of course if any of the hymns actually called for Christians to march out and attack people all churches would remove them. No one wants to go back to the Crusades.

But while military imagery for the church seems to contradict the spirit of Jesus and our mission of reconciliation, the New Testament itself uses that kind of language. Paul refers to his fellow Christians in two letters as “fellow soldiers.” He tells Timothy to “join me in suffering like a good soldier of Jesus Christ” (2 Timothy 2:3). Does this mean that he was to take up arms? Of course not. When Paul tells the Ephesians to put on the full armor of God, what is that armor? Truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, and salvation. Its only weapon is the word of God.

The early Christians often spoke of themselves as soldiers of Christ—as opposed to soldiers of Caesar. To be a soldier meant to be disciplined, to be willing to suffer, and to be loyal—not to be violent. Clement of Alexandria in the second century said “We are an army of peace that sheds no blood.” St. Martin of Tours in the fourth century said “I am a soldier of Christ; it is not permissible for me to fight.”

So I have no problem singing about Christian soldiers. I have no problem with the notion that Harbor Church is an army and that we are lined up to have our names called by our commanding officer, Christ himself. We ought to have the dedication and discipline we expect from our men and women in uniform. We ought to have the courage of soldiers even as we understand that our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the forces of evil. To be a soldier of Christ is a very different thing from being a person who attends church—a member of an audience or even a member of a club who pays his dues. To be a soldier is to be prepared for conflict, to keep yourself in shape, to be willing to give your life for your mission. What would it mean to Harbor Church and to Block Island if we came to this roll call with the attitude of soldiers who have been given a mission to accomplish?

Let’s join in singing the first and last stanzas of *Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus*.

The third meaning of the roll call is the calling of names on the Last Day, at the end of history and time as we know it, when according to the book of Revelation we will all stand before the great white throne. The picture there is of a book called “the Lamb’s Book of Life” which contains the names of all of those who have received the gift of life from Jesus, the Lamb of God who died for us and now reigns in heaven. Revelation 21:27 says, “Only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life will enter the city.” An earlier verse (14) says that anyone whose name is not written in the Book of Life will be thrown into the lake of fire—along with death and hell itself. They will all, apparently, be destroyed.

We don’t much like to think about this—first, because we don’t like to think about death, second because we don’t understand it, and third because we hate the idea that some people are in and some people are out. Of course that talk about final judgment and people being burned up or cast into darkness goes back to Jesus himself, reflecting the Jewish traditions of his day. And when Paul talks about good news, he means primarily the good news that we have been saved from God’s judgment by God himself. Whatever you think about the literal or symbolic meaning of the images in Revelation, this much is clear: the early Christians believed that one day they would give an accounting of their lives. The good news was that the judge to whom they would give an account would be Jesus himself, the one who had died for them and already forgiven them. At the very beginning of the Revelation to John, he sees the blazing glory of the risen Jesus Christ, who says “Don’t be afraid...for I am alive forever, and I hold the keys of death and hell.” The only one who could put us there is the one who has already shown that he loves us.

Can we sing honestly and confidently that when the roll is called up yonder we’ll be there? Yes! The beginning of John’s gospel says that when the eternal Word appeared in flesh among us as Jesus, most people did not accept him, “but to those who did accept him he gave the right to become children of God.” This is the reason Jesus came, John 3:16 famously says, “that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life.” Jesus told Martha, “Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die.” Paul explains in Romans, “The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (6:23); “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:1). It is not a lack of humility to say that you are going to be with God forever. It is an expression of faith.

Please stand and sing, as we do every year, *When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder I'll Be There.*