Several years ago, my younger son Greer was trying to get my attention. He was still pretty small and hadn’t been talking all that long, but he was already very verbal. He chattered a lot. I’m not proud of it, but will admit that sometimes I tuned him out. On this particular evening, I was reading something that had captured my interest (big surprise) and Greer was in his room. “Mom, can you come here a second?” his little voice called to me. “MmmHmm…just a minute,” I replied, lost in whatever it was that was so fascinating. A minute or so later he asked me again. “Moom, come here!” “I haven’t heard the magic word yet,” I said…ostensibly trying to help him develop good manners but really buying myself some time. “Please?” he said. “Okay, okay, just let me finish this…” and I was absorbed again by my book or magazine. It could have gone on like that for a long time if Greer hadn’t gotten more forceful. Suddenly I heard this frustrated voice say “MOM! Can you PLEASE come into my room and help me solve my PROBLEM?” Oh wow. I felt like Mother of the Year at that moment, let me tell you. I quickly dropped what I was doing and ran to Greer’s room. Thankfully, it didn’t turn out to be such a terrible crisis – I think he was trying to reach a toy off a high shelf or something. Hopefully Greer is not scarred for life by my inattentiveness, but at the moment I felt pretty guilty that I had been brushing him off like that.

What always hits me about these gospel stories of the call of the disciples is how quickly Simon and Andrew and James and John drop what they are doing and go off to follow Jesus. We know that they were busy. Mark tells us Simon and Andrew were fishing, and James and John were repairing their nets – and the corresponding passage in Matthew corroborates those details as well. It’s not as if they were just loafing around and had no other responsibilities. It couldn’t have been easy to make a living as a fisherman at the time, they may have had families or elderly parents to provide for. And yet, both Matthew and Mark use the word “immediately.” “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.” In fact, each of the New Testament versions of the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry and his subsequent calling of the first disciples conveys this sense of urgency. There is no caveat of “when you have time, come and follow me.” Jesus does not say “When you get everything else done, I could use a few people to help me out.” These fishermen are either going to go with Jesus, or not. There’s no time to dither or tie up loose ends. In today’s world, it often feels as if we are missing that decisiveness, that commitment. We think that proclamation of the gospel and service to God is something that we can get to later. It’s something we want to do, but there are so many other demands on our time and attention that we don’t make the leap. We keep our decision on the back burner – there’s no sense of urgency.

I’m really not talking about urgency in the sense of salvation and the afterlife. When I
was a child, I can remember young friends who had a different faith tradition from my own who conveyed plenty of worst case scenarios. “Are you saved?” I can remember being asked. “Why not? Don’t you know if you died tonight you would go to hell and stay there forever? You have to be saved.” That is scary business for an elementary school child, and at the time I didn’t have the language or the theological understanding to know how to respond. Today, while I do not share the same beliefs that those kids did, I can respect how seriously they took what their church was teaching them, and their desire to do what they thought was right at the time.

We’ve talked before and will again about how eternity and salvation fit into my faith framework. Suffice it to say today that it is not something I worry about too much – the “saving” that takes place is embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus. I trust God to take care of the rest and to cast a much wider net than I can ever imagine. But if the passion and the commitment that was shown by those first disciples is not driven by concern about what happens when we die, what does (or should) give us a sense of urgency about our life as disciples? What can move us to drop everything and join up with Jesus?

Suppose the key to that question lies in the words Jesus uttered just before calling the disciples? “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.” I wonder if a deeper understanding of what it means to participate in the kingdom of God might rekindle that sense of urgency. I admire the work of the writer and social activist Dorothy Day, who founded the Catholic Worker Movement. Born in 1897, she lived in the California Bay Area during a devastating earthquake in 1906. That was a real turning point for her. In her autobiography *The Long Loneliness* she describes watching while people did anything they could think of to help each other. They pitched tents, gave away clothing, made food, and consoled each other. “While the crisis lasted, people loved each other,” she wrote. “It was as though they were united in Christian solidarity. It makes one think of how people could, if they would, care for each other in times of stress, unjudgingly in pity and love.”

Later, Paul Eli wrote in his biography of Day that “A whole life is prefigured in that episode. From then on she would try to recapture the sense of real and spontaneous community she felt then, and would strive to reform the world around her so as to make such community possible.” I think Dorothy Day was on to something. Of course, none of us ever wish for a disaster to happen to us or anyone else, but there is a sense of connection that can spring forth when people are in a situation where they have no choice but to care for each other.

In late May of 1999, I had traveled to Oklahoma for my brother’s college graduation. I went to Oklahoma a few days before the ceremony to visit other family members. As luck would have it, two terrible tornados hit Oklahoma City and the suburb of Moore within a few hours after I got off the place. It was awful. My Mom and Dad lived in Shawnee at the time, which had a tornado of its own that same night, only not as bad as the ones just 60 miles west. We watched the news coverage in disbelief, as it showed whole city blocks – homes, schools, businesses, everything – just leveled by the twisters. I have forgotten how many injuries and deaths there were, but it was a lot.

The next day, my Dad had gone to work, but my Mom and I were glued to the television and it seemed like every few minutes there was some fresh story about a family who had lost their house, or someone who was missing, or schools that had had to cancel graduations and promotion ceremonies. We were filled with sadness, watching all of the terrible things that had
happened. Then the OKC news put out a call for volunteers. Donations of food, water, bedding and clothing were pouring in. They needed people to come to unload trucks, sort donations, pack them up, and organize them onto other trucks that would take them into the neighborhoods where they were needed. Mom and I looked at each other, wrote down the address of the place where they wanted volunteers to meet, and got in the car. There were plenty of other things we could have been doing that day, but I don’t remember any discussion or uncertainty. This was what we were going to do, where God was calling us to be.

I think of that afternoon whenever I read Dorothy’s Day’s reflections on the 1906 earthquake. My Mom and I experienced an incredible sense of purpose and love that day. We didn’t know another soul there, but somehow we got organized into assembly lines and got to work. There was so much camaraderie and laughter. There was a sense of relationship that went deeper than ties of social class or skin color or favorite sports team or political party or any of the other false mechanisms that we normally use to group ourselves. At one point a small child, a little girl, tugged on my shirt. “Excuse me,” she said. She was crying. “I’ve lost my Mom and I don’t know how to find her.” After determining that she was with a family of volunteers, she wasn’t a victim of the tornado, I figured her mother had to be nearby. “Okay,” I said. “Let’s go find her.” I will never forget the total trust she displayed when she put her little hand into mine and walked with me.

It didn’t take us long to find her mother. She had been absorbed into another group of workers probably fifty yards away from us. I think the little girl had just gotten overwhelmed and panicked. Once we found her Mom, Mom and daughter and I all hugged and high fived like old friends. A couple of other times during that afternoon, the child came over from her spot to mine, just to hang out. I never learned her name. It didn’t matter.

Sometimes I think about that day – the unimaginable awfulness the tornados had wrought, and the beauty that came from hundreds of people deciding that they had to do something to help. It was, I think, akin to what Day observed in Oakland, California in 1906. I don’t want horrible things to happen to anyone, but the urgency that comes at such times can reorder our priorities and call us to our best selves.

So what these memories bring up for me is the question: is there any way to reclaim the decisiveness and focus that emerge in a crisis and appropriate that to our discipleship? When we hear the voice of Jesus saying “Follow me,” it may or may not be in the middle of a situation that is life or death in the moment. But there are always hurting people, people who need to know that they are not alone, that they are treasured by God and cared about by their neighbors. When we get serious about living within the realm of God of which Jesus spoke, we will come to understand that he can show us the way, for he IS the way. And what could be more urgent than that?

Thanks be to God for showing us the way, and may God give us the steadfastness and courage to follow it. Amen.