

“Worthy Is Not the Point”

Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – February 6, 2022

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be truly opened
to your call and ready to follow. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

There are a number of things that are a bit mysterious in this passage from Luke 5. First of all, it's interesting that, at least right here, there's no mention of what Jesus actually said from that boat. The implication seems to be that it was the haul of fish that convinced Simon Peter to follow, rather than anything Jesus said. Secondly, what happened to all those fish? Two boats full and Simon and James and John just walk away. I suppose we are left to assume that the unnamed partners dealt with the fish and repaired the nets and put the boats away.

But most interesting of all is Jesus' response to Simon Peter. Simon is already demonstrating his flair for the dramatic: He throws himself at Jesus' knees and cries out, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" And what does Jesus say? He doesn't ask him to confess his sins; he doesn't pray over him or even offer him forgiveness. He simply says "Do not be afraid," and then moves on with a brief 'we're doing this now.'

It's easy to see why the lectionary creators would have combined this passage with the story of Isaiah's call. Simon's dramatic protestation is an obvious echo of Isaiah's "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a

people of unclean lips!” But the more subtle similarity here is how little God or Jesus seem to think any of that matters. In Isaiah’s case, the matter is delegated to a seraph, who – perhaps understanding that Isaiah needs some reassurance the sin thing isn’t a problem – performs the ritual purifying Isaiah’s lips with the live coal. The Lord of hosts, it seems, can’t be bothered with that part. The implication is that of course Isaiah is a man of unclean lips; obviously he’s a man of unclean lips. Isn’t everyone? If that were a barrier, none of this would work.

What’s weird is that throughout Christian history, we Jesus followers have been really slow to get this message. It’s not that Jesus never talked about sin; he did, indeed, include a line seeking forgiveness for our sins in the prayer he taught us. But when it comes to following Jesus, to being part of what God is doing in our world? It simply isn’t a disqualifying factor. God has plenty of grace to deal with that part. The question is whether we’re going to go where God is sending us or not.

Gradually over the centuries, the truth of this abundant grace has slowly begun to sink in. Many of us have left behind habits of self-flagellation – literal and figurative – for the most part, though we all have our triggers when it comes to paralyzing guilt. If this is still a struggle for you, especially if it’s keeping you from answering Jesus’ invitation into ministry and service, I want you to hear clearly today that God’s mercy is far more powerful than anything you have done or left undone. Your sinfulness is not a barrier to God using you for good. Do not be afraid. Just listen and be ready when Jesus says, “This is what we’re doing now.”

Beyond the sin versus grace debate though, I have the feeling that we've developed some new problems. When folks are asked to serve these days, their sinfulness is rarely the excuse they offer. I've been thinking about this a bit lately, as I'm preparing to lead the Regional Nominating Committee in building a slate of leaders to present to the Regional Assembly for approval next October, and as our own Nominating Committee is beginning its work for our ministry year that begins in July. If it isn't an overwhelming sense of our own sinfulness that tilts us toward saying No when those calls come, what is it? And how might we imagine Jesus would respond?

Have you ever stopped to think about what makes a church go? I mean, we run on love, obviously, but love that's expressed through a thousand different little and large tasks getting done by a bunch of different people on a regular basis. I'm pretty sure, though, that one of the barriers to people entering into ministry and service is an assumption that someone else is already taking care of everything. Especially in a small church, one person can get attached to a certain job in everyone else's head and it's just assumed it's taken care of. We don't stop to wonder if that person could use some help or if they're maybe getting a little burnt out or bored. It's easier to just let things go along like they always have. Until that person quits, of course. Let me be clear: an assumption that things are taken care of is not a safe assumption in a church. Because it eventually leads to things not being taken care of. Or being hastily fixed by the paid staff at the last minute, which is not better.

I wonder if you've ever heard this story. It's story about four people whose names were Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody. There was an important job to be done, and Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that, because it was Everybody's job. Everybody thought Anybody could do it, but Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have.

I'm pretty sure most of us have experienced this story at least once before. And most of us would prefer to avoid doing it again. So when we bump up against the barrier of "isn't Somebody taking care of that?" in our shared church life, we need to think about how Jesus would respond to this barrier. What did he say to Simon? "Do not be afraid." That answer might be best applied to the members of the Nominating Committee themselves, who worry that they won't get all the roles filled. But do you remember another answer Jesus gave the disciples, when they warned him that it was time to send the crowd away so they could get dinner? "You give them something to eat," he said. When it comes to how the work will get done, Jesus tells us not to be afraid, because he wants us to understand that we do have the resources we need to be church. We just need to be ready to step up and pitch in when the time comes, even if all we have to offer is some bread and fish.

Speaking of what we have to offer, I will say, I have been anticipating concerns about the ways that the pandemic may affect the nominating processes, both here and

Regionally. Some of us don't even feel like we have any bread to offer. We're wiped out, exhausted, brain-dead, and dull. Frequently, in the past, when someone is going through a particularly hard time, we will avoid pressuring them to commit to a job because we know that they haven't got a lot of extra energy to give. But what happens when that happens to all of us at once? I want to be very careful about how I say this, but I definitely don't want to push anyone to giving more than you have. We're all teetering on the edge of burn-out, some days falling all the way in and occasionally catching our breath.

But in a way, this relates to a dynamic that has always been present in the Nominating process. The Nominating Committee is, for instance, trying to discern who God might be calling to serve as an Elder. And they come up with a list of names. And sometimes, someone on that list hasn't been an Elder before. And when they're invited to consider this call, their immediate response is that they aren't qualified. No matter that the Committee saw fit to call them, they're sure they don't have what it takes. This is sometimes related to the issue Isaiah and Simon had, where they don't feel holy enough. But it's often more about whether they feel they have the skills or stature or wisdom. Isn't it fascinating how different that can look from the outside as opposed to the inside?

Whether it's a matter of capability or capacity, the truth is that even when we're feeling tapped out, other people can see gifts within us that we can't. Our collective capacity as a congregation going through a pandemic is lower than normal. And do

you know what we've learned from that? It has helped us identify more clearly just what is truly necessary to do and be church and let go of what was just window-dressing. When you're asked to be a deacon these days, you're not being asked to be a deacon like we had in the 'before-times.' We've simplified and adapted and accommodated, not just because we had to but because we're discovering it's more possible to do than we ever imagined.

The positions the Nominating Committee will be trying to fill generally have terms of 2 or 3 years. Isn't it lovely to think how things will hopefully be 2 or 3 years from now? To imagine that life might not be so exhausting and stressful and confusing? To picture the sanctuary being so full again that it really does need four deacons to cover it? That day may come; we pray it does. But for right now, we're not asking anyone to be the best Deacon in the history of deaconing. We're just asking everyone to pitch in and do the best you can in each moment as it comes. I've had to reassure people before, when they were asked to serve for the first time, that it's okay to not know what they're doing and even to make mistakes. And it is. So let me add to that: it's okay if you only do a half-way job of whatever it is you're asked to do. We're all here to help each other out. Our standards have slipped, by the power of God's grace! We're down to the basics, and it's an illuminating experience, if we're paying attention. We're getting through, lifting each other up as we can when needed. The gaps that matter are filled in; the rest are left for another day. And the church continues to be faithful. "Do not be afraid."

There is a final barrier to service that I can imagine being a powerful presence in our hearts these days, and that's apathy. For many of us, the long strain of the pandemic has just led us to numbness. We're finding it hard to care about much of anything. I get it, I do. But I hope that if you dig deep, you will discover that it does matter to you if this church is here. We've got about a month before the Nominating Committee begins its work in earnest. What if we were all to spend this month in frequent prayer for the refreshment of our hearts and the restoration of our souls? What if we were to pray over the next few weeks that the Spirit might answer our cries of woe as that seraph did Isaiah's, and bring us healing? We have been promised that even when we can't find the words to pray ourselves, the Spirit will intercede with "sighs too deep for words." It's a scary thing to stop and notice the numbness of your heart, the power apathy can seem to have over your will. But listen to Jesus: "Do not be afraid." The Spirit will equip us, so that, together, we can do what needs doing, if not with excellence then good enough, to keep being church. And when the Nominating Committee calls on you, listen for God saying "Whom shall I send?" I pray we will all find it within ourselves to say "Here am I. Send me." Hallelujah and Amen.