

“An Abundance of Examples”

Philippians 4:4-9; Luke 5:1-11 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – February 16, 2025
First Sunday of Week of Compassion

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might hear your call to loving service and follow the path you set before us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Who taught you your faith? Was it a parent, a grandparent? A Sunday school teacher, a pastor, a camp counselor? Was it your spouse, or a friend? All of the above? Think about who those people are in your life. Some of them are hopefully still teaching you today. Picture them in your mind's eye. What do you know about what those folks had experienced in life? Who taught them their faith? What had it carried them through by the time you knew them?

It makes a difference. Our faith is shaped by who we are, where we fit in in the world, and what has happened to us over the years. All of that affects what we hold to be important, how we cope with difficulty, and how we teach others – implicitly or explicitly – about what really matters.

Peter and Paul both had dramatic conversion experiences, but their paths were equally impacted by who they were before those things happened. Simon Peter's story starts off slow. It's not even clear that he's paying attention when Jesus first shows up on the shore. Jesus is teaching; it's apparently early in the morning, but Simon Peter has been up all night, so he's likely exhausted. It doesn't seem that he

would assume that crowd on the beach would have anything to do with him; he has nets to clean. But then that guy who was giving the speeches commandeers his boat. By then, it seems Simon could tell that Jesus needed a little space from the pressing crowd, so he agrees to take him out a bit from the shore, so people can still hear him, but not knock him over in their enthusiasm. At that point, what does he have to do but listen? But the teachings aren't recorded here, are they? Because they aren't what lead to Simon Peter's conversion. It was the fish. So many fish. Too many fish, too many for their net, too many for their boat, too many for both of their boats. So many fish.

Simon's life is taking dramatic twists this morning! They'd worked all night for nothing, catching zip, nada, no fish. But now, So Many Fish! You might think he'd be jumping up and down with joy. But he wasn't. Simon Peter was freaking out. After hearing some of what Jesus was talking about, he had come to the conclusion that this stuff wasn't for him. It sounded too good – too pure, too pleasing and honorable and commendable. That's just not the kind of guy Simon Peter was. He was brash and impulsive and probably swore a lot. His life was usually spent teetering on the edge of not making it, since it depended on whether the fish were biting. Abundant life wasn't a burden he was prepared for. Especially when it involved such righteousness and glory. But somehow, something in the way Jesus said what he said next inspired a whole new dramatic twist in Peter's life. All those fish, abandoned; let someone else clean them and sell them. Peter was going to follow Jesus.

Paul, of course, has an equally dramatic, but very different story. He was not a fisherman. He was better educated, from a more elite class than Simon Peter, one that probably didn't involve being so smelly. Critically, he first made his name by becoming a persecutor of Christians. Then, as he was setting out on a trip to go persecute Christians in another town, he had a vision of Christ, which struck him blind. And after three days of sightlessness, he emerged a convicted Christ-follower. He was blind, but then he could see. And after that, he wanted everyone to see.

These stories matter. The things people have gone through make a difference in the way they experience their faith, and they make a difference in the way they teach that faith to us. What have we learned and received and heard and seen? Was it the faith of someone whose conversion experience was swift and dramatic? Was it the faith of someone whose circumstances drastically shifted? Or were you shaped by people who lived lifetimes of long, steady faithfulness, taught to them by the faithful ones who came before? Have you witnessed someone whose faith was real, but perhaps a bit shallow, whom life then threw in the deep end, and then they really got to know Jesus? Have you been that person? What have you learned and received? What have you heard and seen? Are you still listening and looking?

Paul speaks of leaning into our core convictions, the things we know to be central to our faith: justice, truthfulness, honor. Can you think of other things to add to this list? Integrity, mercy, generosity, compassion. Who are the people who taught us these virtues? Who are the people who are teaching us how to live them today?

The stories that we saw in that Week of Compassion video and read about on the flyer in your bulletin are stories that our fellow Disciples heard and saw when they visited our partners. We hear the call to care for the most vulnerable in situations of danger; in this case in particular, elderly people and children impacted by the war in Ukraine. And there is one vital lesson in that story that we need to hear: the people working with Hungarian Reformed Church Aid didn't assume that they knew what those refugees needed. They used a model that listened carefully to those affected by the war, the refugees themselves. The programs they developed were "survivor- and community-led responses" empowering those who were directly impacted to take leadership. This is, of course, a double blessing, for in addition to the programs themselves, the people who were being served were regaining their sense of agency and control over their own lives, when so much had been taken from them.

This is why Week of Compassion always does its work with partners in whatever location we show up in. We have learned our core convictions over many decades, from the lives of the faithful who have gone before us. But we learn how to implement those core convictions, how to bring them to life in each new situation, by continuing to listen and observe, so that we can truly respond in ways that are respectful, authentic, and compassionate. Our stories matter. Others' stories matter. The things we've gone through make a difference in what kind of compassion we most need. Our experiences influence how the core convictions of our faith will be lived out.

When Paul says “keep on doing what you have heard and seen in me,” he is encouraging the Philippians to continue following Jesus. Paul, of course, could only show them Jesus through the lens of himself, but he was continually striving to show them Jesus and not merely Paul. That’s why it’s so important to have some sense of the experiences that shaped the people who taught us our faith, so that we can tell the difference between what was Jesus and what was them. If a grandparent was very loving to family but suspicious of outsiders, we can broaden our faith to stretch the definition of family to include outsiders and still look to that model of love. If a dear teacher told you that God loves everyone equally but continues to use language that diminishes certain groups of people, you can embrace the teaching and ignore the bad habit. We look for Jesus, in all of our teachers, in all of our fellow Christians, in all those we would aim to serve and assist. And through the sum of their faith and their experiences and their attempts at faithful following, combined with our faith and our experiences and our attempts at faithful following, we continue to grow and learn.

Don’t be afraid, says Jesus. Keep on keeping on, says Paul. Leave those fish for someone else, says Peter. Focus on Christ and respond to the world with the convictions of the faith you carry. Listen, observe, learn, pray, give thanks, rejoice even! May we follow Christ Jesus with courageous compassion. Hallelujah and Amen.