

“Imperfection and Transformation”

A Sermon Based on Isaiah 6:1-8 and Luke 5:1-11

Delivered at First Presbyterian Church, Urbana

on Sunday, February 10th, 2019

by David Oliver-Holder

Perfection is not required for ministry, not for deacons, not for elders, not for musicians, not even for pastors, Thanks be to God! If perfection were required, there would be no church.

All three of the scripture passages we have heard this morning paint pictures of imperfection, frailty, and brokenness, and then show how God can use such people nonetheless. Isaiah, overwhelmed by the holiness of God, and of the scene of heavenly worship, bemoans his uncleanness, and cries out, “Woe is me.” Paul, with great regret, describes how his misplaced zeal led him to persecute the first disciples, leaving him to feel that he could never be more than the least of the Apostles. And Peter, suddenly aware of the power of God at work in Jesus, also is aware of his own sinfulness, so much so that he asks Jesus to leave him. He does not feel worthy.

What distinguishes saints from others is not their perfection. Never has. What sets them apart is their sense of their own brokenness and imperfection, their humility, but also their awareness that God can still work through them. Saints come to realize that if God is not put off by their imperfection, then they won't be put off by it, or disabled by it, either. Saints say, “Here I am. Send me.”

II

A colleague tells the story of a saintly deed in her church. One weekend, one of the beloved saints of the congregation, Sara, died after a long struggle with Alzheimer's. The minister was at church early, talking with the choir director about music for the upcoming funeral.

While they were talking, Jonathan, a high school sophomore entered. He said, “I heard about Sara, and I thought you might need me to take Libby's spot in the bell choir this morning.” The choir director quickly and gratefully accepted the offer. Libby is Sara's daughter, and, of course, she would not be there.

The minister was very moved by what she saw. Here was this 16 year old guy who was willing to get up early, and drive himself to church so that he could play the bells with the rest of the bell choir, made up of 50 and 60 year olds. But even more impressive was Jonathan's perceptiveness. He knew that Libby was Sara's daughter. And he knew about the ways congregations work. Because of Libby's loss, she not be able to play on Sunday. Jonathan knew that he could help, and so all on his own, he stepped up to offer his help.

That is what saints do. Sometimes that looks like a scout doing a good turn daily.

God speaks to people in ordinary things. People who can learn to clear away all of the distracting noise can "hear" God speak while walking through a grove of pines as the wind blows through the boughs. Or they can witness an event and see God in it, or learn a new truth after thinking about the event. Or a person will struggle and fight to solve a problem or come to terms with an issue, sometimes for years. And they discover that solution or key in the simple way someone says something to them, a thing said in a way unimagined before. At that instant, all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place.

God speaks to us in the simple things of every day. Those who are paying attention get the message almost day in and day out. That is the wonder and the joy of our faith, that the God who created the universe speaks to you and to me and to anyone who will listen.

The Psalmist points to this when it was written, "what are human beings that you are mindful of them,... yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." (Ps. 8:4-5) What we do with the message of God, that is a different matter altogether.

III

When we reach Luke chapter 5, Jesus is already famous. Large crowds were coming to hear him teach and see him heal. On this occasion, Jesus is standing by the Sea of Galilee, hemmed in by the crowd, so much so that he got into one of the boats and pushed out a bit so that more of the crowd could hear

his words. The boat he climbed into was Simon's, part of the team that had been out all night fishing and had brought not one fish back.

I suspect that Simon and Jesus were not strangers. The tone of their exchange in this passage is so cordial. Knowing the temper that Simon Peter demonstrates later, I doubt that he would have let a stranger into his boat.

When Jesus wonders over, the fishermen must have been exhausted, wanting only to finish cleaning their nets before going home to get some sleep. Yet Simon allows Jesus to take him away from his work as he pushes his boat out from the shore. And after Jesus finishes teaching, who knows how long that was, Jesus tells Simon to give the fish another try.

In weariness, Simon answers, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." Simon would not have said that to a stranger. In Luke, the word "Master" appears 6 times as a title for Jesus. Only believers use it when speaking of Jesus. Nonbelievers call Jesus "teacher."

So Jesus and Simon, and probably Simon's co-workers, already have a relationship with Jesus. Likely, Jesus believed that these men would make good students who would help him with his growing ministry. Yet he had not broken through to reach them, to persuade them to join him in his work. The unexpected huge catch of fish made the message clear.

Instantly, Peter was aware of great power, and reacted as Isaiah did in his vision, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" His reaction is not that of the puzzled fisherman: "Now why didn't I know where the fish were?" He responds like a person who knows that he is in the presence of someone worthy to be called "Lord."

Peter is confronted, then, not with a question of his skills as a fisherman. The question suddenly before him is one about his life. He must now rethink who he is, and what he's going to be about. He stands at a crossroads, and he must decide which way to go.

This great moment of decision for Peter is very much like another that he will have later. That moment we read about in John 21. That scene takes place

after the resurrection of Jesus, and after Peter denied Jesus three times outside the trial.

Again, Peter and the others had been out all night fishing, only to return to shore with nothing. Again, Jesus approached them on the shore, but they did not recognize him at first. Learning that they have caught no fish, Jesus told them to try again. And just like the first time, their catch was tremendous. It was then that the disciples recognized Jesus.

Later, on the shore, while they were eating, Jesus put three hard questions to Peter. Three times he asked, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" And three times, Peter answered, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." And after each answer, Jesus told him, "Feed my sheep."

Having denied Jesus three times, he must have felt entirely worthless, traitorous even. In his questions, Jesus reminded Peter of his calling. In both our passage for today from Luke, and in this passage from John, Peter was called to service. And both times, Peter's sin did not disqualify him for service.

Of course, that does not mean the sin does not matter. The reason that his sin did not disqualify Peter was that when Jesus exposed who he was, a sinful man, Peter acknowledged his sinfulness. He did not try to hide it or deny it. He confessed, "I am a sinful man."

And that is not all. Jesus does not come to us just to point out our sin, to expose who we are. Jesus also at the same time points to what we can be. He shows us we can be like him, Christ-like. To be like him is to be a servant.

So Jesus said to Simon, as Luke tells the story, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." The same power that prompted Simon to his knees, lifted him up into God's service.ⁱ And Peter, along with his partners, left everything and followed him.

That is the essence of discipleship, answering "Yes," and then following. Saying "yes" makes Jesus Master, where before his was only Teacher.

IV

God encounters all of us, not to condemn and terrify, but to transform and to call. To what are we called? We are called to be witnesses, witnesses of what

God has done in Christ and of what God continues to do through us. As disciples, we are here to be transformed, through God's grace, to live as Jesus lived.

And we are to demonstrate why others should live in this way. We are here to show a different way of living, one that doesn't live as if the bottom line is the only thing that matters, one that believes that love is stronger than hate, one that ignores the distinctions the world values so much, distinctions about men and women, races, and classes. We are to live lives that persuade by example, not by force, lives that manifest the belief that true power belongs to servants.

In dedicating ourselves to live in the way of Jesus, our skill matters less than our willingness to follow. Saying "yes" to the Master is the essential beginning. Our past sins need not stand in our way. As one writer put it, "When we embrace the disparity between [God's] call and [our] inadequacies, we move from illusion to reality, and from self-justification to divine acceptance."ⁱⁱ

That God's grace is great than our sin, thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Fred Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 70.

ⁱⁱ Daniel B. Clendenin, "Journey with Jesus," a blog, for the week of February 7th, 2010.