

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
February 10, 2019
Title: We Are Still Being Called
Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-8
Luke 5:1-11

I serve on the District Committee on Ministry and have done so for many years. One of the questions we are always asking candidates is to describe their call to ministry. This week I had the opportunity to listen as a man in his 40's described first how we came to follow Jesus, and then how he came to believe that he was called to pursue the road to parish ministry.

His story had some dramatic parts to it, but the part that caught my attention the most was his honest sharing that he really didn't know exactly where this call was taking him. He was clear that he was committed to the journey and that he trusted God to lead him and guide him along the way.

This caught my attention because, I believe, that it is an almost universal part of the call that God extends to each of us. When we say, "yes" to following Jesus, the reality is that we do not know what that is going to look like. Especially for people like me, who like to be in control and like to plan, that can be a real growing edge.

We never really know what the journey will look like once we have said yes to Jesus. I have watched each of my grandchildren become acquainted with books. At some point, the child has learned enough to realize that the pages hold a story and each one has picked up books that they have never seen before and started telling stories as they turn the pages.

Those stories, of course, come from their experiences, their memories and their imaginations. At that point, they have no idea of how exciting it will be when those strange marks on a page gain meaning and

they can be transported into other worlds and possibilities. They see something and they know it is important, but they have a long way to go before they really begin to grasp the incredible possibilities. The man I listened to this week, was eager to be open to those possibilities even though they are not completely clear to him right now.

There was something similar going on with Simon in today's scripture reading. Simon and his partners were hard working fishermen. Sometimes they brought back nets full of fish, but other times, like this time, they come back with empty nets. They had fished all night but had caught nothing. They were tired and probably frustrated and disappointed. All they wanted to do was wash their nets, put their tools away and go home for a nap before they tried again.

But as they cleaned up, they were aware of a crowd gathering on the shore trying to get near to one man in particular. Luke says the "crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God." Jesus was getting closer and closer to the water as the crowd pressed in more and more. Jesus got into Simon's boat and asked him to push out a little way into the water.

Tired, frustrated, and eager to go home, nevertheless, Simon did push the boat out a little bit and allowed Jesus to speak to the crowd from his boat. This probably tells us something about Simon, but it also tells us something about Jesus. We don't know if Simon knew who Jesus was. He might have heard about the carpenter who was attracting crowds. Maybe, Simon thought this would be a good opportunity to hear him. Maybe he thought his boat would be safer in the water than on the sand with such a large crowd gathering.

When Jesus was done speaking to the crowd, he told Simon to "put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Something had

happened to Simon while Jesus was speaking. He knew the waters. He was good at his job, and yet, when this carpenter told him to put out in deep water and let down his nets for a catch, he did so.

Simon, also known as Peter, becomes known to us in scripture for speaking his mind – in fact for speaking the first words that come into his mind. So initially he told Jesus, that they had worked all night and caught nothing, but because Jesus told him to do so, he would let down his nets. By the way, this would have meant, that this tired man would have had to repeat all his cleaning process again.

Simon and his partners in the boat, let down the net and caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. They caught so many fish that they had to signal to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They filled both boats with so many fish that they began to sink.

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell down at Jesus' knees saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" This is a pretty typical response to the presence of Jesus, to the presence of the Holy, to the presence of God. In the reading from Isaiah, his response was "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts!"

It's a pretty normal response when initially encountering God to want to get away from God, to feel not only inadequate but also unworthy. It's kind of like meeting a person who is at the top of your field. We might be honored but often we don't feel worthy enough to take up the person's time, afraid that he or she will see how little we really know. And yet, it is an honor and there is nothing we'd like more than to be able to really spend time with that person, if only we could feel comfortable in doing so.

While Simon was telling Jesus to go away from him because he was a sinful man, I think that what he was really saying was, “I’m not worthy to be with you, but please don’t leave me. I want to be with you. I want to be near your power.” Jesus’ response to him was, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” Wisely, Jesus didn’t say to him, “From now you will be talking to crowds of people. From now on you will be part of a new plan that will transform the world.” Those things probably would have had Peter running in the opposite direction

“From now on you will be catching people” or “fishing for people”. That doesn’t sound quite as scary. Peter knows how to fish. He knows that you use different kinds of bait for different kinds of fish. He knows that you use different kinds of nets for different fish. He knows that sometimes you catch a lot of fish very easily and other times you fish all night and don’t catch any. Peter has some skills that Jesus can use, even if Peter doesn’t really recognize them right now.

Simon Peter responded by leaving behind his boat and following Jesus. James and John – the sons of Zebedee – and Simon’s partners – also left their boat and followed Jesus. In the Old Testament reading, after his initial argument, Isaiah responded, “Here am I; send me!”. Throughout the Bible, repeatedly we see people arguing with God, proclaiming that they aren’t qualified, aren’t good enough, and then they respond by following. Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, Jonah just to name a few. The list continues. Many of the people I know who are pastors, including myself, began by arguing with God, but ending up saying yes, and have celebrated that decision, rather than regretting it.

God’s call comes to each and every one of us. “Come, follow me.” Always the call is to catch people, but the gifts we bring are different and

the methods are different. Some of us fish for people by caring for their physical health, some by caring for their mental or emotional health. Some fish by teaching, some by providing hospitality, others by writing, preaching, visiting, by using whatever gifts God has given to us. Some of us think we have no gifts, nothing to offer, but still God calls us. Each of us, no matter who we are, no matter how talented we think we are, or think we aren't, each of us has gifts that God can and will use to spread God's word, God's love and God's mission.

The call continues through the ages and continues today. There are some things that have not changed and probably never will. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Moses, Simon, James and John didn't know what they were walking into. Walking with Jesus means walking away from certitude and walking toward possibilities that we cannot yet see.

Saying "yes" doesn't mean sitting around feeling good. "Following" is an action word – and following Jesus means reordering our priorities so that God is at the center and all the other wonderful things in life fall into place around the center, around God.

"Following" is not only an invitation to walk with Jesus, but it is also a commissioning to service. It is taking on the responsibility for the example we set for others. You have likely heard the saying, "You are the only Bible, some people will ever read." Whether we like it or not, people are looking at the way we live our lives and for many we become the example of what a Christian is and does.

If we talk about God's love but spend our time criticizing and judging others, it could be argued that we have taught people that God's love doesn't really mean much to us. If we talk about the importance of worshipping God but most Sundays find us any place other than church,

our children can surely be forgiven for thinking that worshipping God is not important. If we talk about the good things that the church does but toss only our spare change in the offering plate, our witness is lacking.

Following Jesus means more than just being a good person. There are many good people in our world who do not yet really know about God's love or the wonderful life waiting for us when we answer God's call to really follow Jesus.

Now, the likelihood is that you have already said yes to God or you would likely not be here today, but following God is more than just a one-time commitment. Follow is an active verb and it implies and requires movement. It requires reordering our commitments and priorities to align with God's call in our lives. This is something that we need to pay attention to on a daily basis. God rejoices with us in all the other wonderful things in our lives and I know that we can and do encounter God in the time spent with a grandchild or a spouse or a friend. I know that sometimes being faithful to God means being at a child's school event rather than at a church event. I know that we can, and do, encounter God in nature, but we also need the opportunity to encounter God surrounded by other Christians in worship.

The question that we face on a daily basis is are we putting God first. If the answer to that is yes, then all our other priorities will fall in place and be in harmony with God's will rather than in conflict with God's will.

Once we have said yes to God, we must also be willing to try something new and different even if it might not make sense to us at the time. When Jesus told Simon to put out into deep water and let down his nets for a catch, Simon did offer some initial resistance. It made no sense to Simon. Simon was the fisherman; Jesus was a carpenter. Simon had

already started the process of washing his nets and packing them away, and now he would have to do all that again. He knew there were no fish out there. He had worked all night and caught nothing.

Still, at Jesus' word, Simon did let down his nets and brought in a huge catch. It has been said that the seven last words of a church are "We never did it that way before." Probably another likely set would be "We tried that, and it didn't work." Sometimes, Jesus tells us to let down our nets where we have tried before, and it didn't work. Sometimes Jesus knows something we don't know. Sometimes circumstances have changed and what didn't work before will work now. Sometimes what we have done so many times before may no longer be working as well as it once did, and should be left behind so that we can do something different.

When we want to keep casting our nets in the same place but with diminishing results, we may need to ask what God is calling us to do that is different. When we don't want to cast our nets in a different place or a different way, we may be surprised to discover that our willingness to try something new may yield results that we could never have imagined.

Our Christian DNA is to preach the word creatively in any circumstance. John Wesley preached at the mines and in the open fields when the Church of England refused to allow him to preach in its pulpits. John knew that he needed to preach, and he went where the people were.

Jesus went to the lakeshore and the open road and in today's reading his pulpit was a boat. "Jesus and John Wesley challenge us not to wait for people to come inside the church walls, but to see all the people beyond the church walls."ⁱ The challenge for us as a church and as individual members of this congregation is to go to where the people are – our places of employment, the schools, the market, wherever we may find ourselves.

For most of us, this doesn't mean standing on the street corner loudly preaching about God. I can't tell you how grateful I am, that I have never been aware of God calling me to do that.

But it does mean that at work, at school, in the store, wherever we find ourselves we act in ways that reflects what we know of God. It does mean that we treat people the way that God wants us to treat others. It means that we let our light shine so that others may see that light, so that seeds may be planted and watered.

It means that when the opportunity presents itself, when someone asks us a question or opens a conversation, we may share a part of our faith that is appropriate and helpful. It means that we are willing to dream big for God and with God. It means that we are willing to see what people don't see and to find meaning in life. It means we are willing to change our priorities in life and grow deeper in our relationship with God, so that we really do become disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ General Board of Discipleship web page – “See All The People”, suggestions for worship after Epiphany.

ⁱⁱ Some of the thoughts for this paragraph and some phrases also come from the above source.