

## **“Sinners Need ~~Not~~ Apply”**

Liturgical Date: Epiphany 5 (C)

Primary Text: Isaiah 6:1-8; St. Luke 5:1-11

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary texts for today, the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, are the Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah 6 and the Gospel Lesson from St. Luke 5. The title of the sermon for today is “Sinners Need ~~Not~~ Apply”, but contains a “strikethrough” of the word “not” as this is something significant that we need to know. GOD CALLS SINFUL PEOPLE TO SERVE HIM IN MIGHTY WAYS SO THAT THEY MAY BE TRANSFORMED BY THE FORGIVENESS OF THE LORD INTO VESSELS THAT SPEAK HIS SAVING WORD.

In the Epiphany season readings we hear each year about at least one of the times when Jesus called the Twelve Disciples. The Lord Jesus is revealing who He is, the Messiah-the Son of God, who has come for the salvation of the world. And He does not do this alone. In both the Old and New Testaments we read about God calling people to be His mouthpieces. People who would serve, minister, in His Name. God has also called each Christian to vocations in the Kingdom of God. No matter the vocations, or roles, that you have the most important is as a child of God. As followers of the Lord we are called to love God and others. We are called to witness of the awesome deeds and redemption that is in Christ in whatever context He has placed us. But sometimes, we may feel unworthy of such a calling.

If you sometimes feel inadequate for such an important mission or that you are just too much of a sinner to be an ambassador and spokesperson for Christ-then I have good news for you today. You are in good company. We see two of the most towering figures in all of Christendom expressing unworthiness in our Bible readings for today, these two are, of course, Isaiah and Peter. In fact, the outlook of not thinking too highly of ourselves or better than others is a good sign that you have the proper perspective of one who serves effectively. From our Psalm for today, 138:6, *“For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar.”*

So how does God choose those who will do mighty things for Him? Well, He does it in a very different way than is typical in our world. High school athletes today have highlight videos, which show off their athletic feats in seeking college scholarships. People create dating profiles that make them sound like a contestant on “The Bachelor.” If you are trying to get a job you generally want to appear confident and highly qualified. You point to your resume, which highlights your experience and education. There are companies who actually search out and evaluate potential candidates for jobs. What if Jesus had used such a consulting firm in choosing His 12 Disciples? Perhaps it would have gone something like this: (read illustration of an evaluation of the “disciple candidates”)

As Maxwell Smart used to say on the campy 1960s TV spy show, “Missed it by that much.” (hold fingers together) One of our former pastors at Trinity, Pastor Heitschusen, used to like to say, *“God does not call the equipped, but equips the called.”* This is very true as we read

about this over and over again in the Bible. Moses had killed a man and fled and saw himself as a poor speaker. David was a shepherd boy who was an unlikely choice for giant-killer and king. Mary was very young and from a backwater town. The Apostle Paul was a persecutor of the Church. You could go on and on. And what of your own Christian life? If you have been a Christian for a while, do you know more than you did 10 years ago? Are you able to serve the Church with more developed skills than you had 20 years ago? God is constantly discipling us, growing us, leading us. He is looking for those that are humble, yet willing to be bold by the power of the Holy Spirit. He wants clay that He can shape and mold to be effective soldiers in the army of the Lord. If it were truly “sinners need not apply” in the Kingdom of God, it would be very lonely and small kingdom.

In both Isaiah 6 and Luke 5 we see the awesome power of God on display. Isaiah is given a view of the glory of the Lord, verse 1, *“I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.”* Angels, seraphim, are there crying out *“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory”* as the smoke fills the chamber. An incredible scene to say the least.

Then in the Luke 5, Peter and his brother Andrew along with James and his brother John have returned from a night of fruitless fishing. Jesus tells them where to let down their nets and although they let Jesus know (as if He didn’t already!) that they had been trying to catch fish all night and had come up empty, they listen to the words of Jesus. The result is a miraculous catch of fish that is net-breaking and fills both fishing boats so full they begin to sink. Wow!

The reactions of Isaiah and Peter are strikingly similar. Isaiah witnessing this awesome throne-room scene exclaims, *“Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of people of unclean lips”* (v5). Peter, astonished by the huge draught of fish, fell down at Jesus’ knees pleading, *“Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord”* (v8). Isaiah and Peter saw themselves as unworthy of being in the presence of such power of God. And this confession of sinfulness and unworthiness is exactly what makes them qualified to do great things for the Lord. They feel improperly equipped, but this will change.

One of the seraphim angels takes a live coal from the altar, which is the presence of God, and touches this coal to the lips of Isaiah. He testifies, *“Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away and thy sin purged”* (v7). Similarly, the miracle of the fish confirms that Peter and the others have been chosen by God. Dr. Arthur Just in his commentary on Luke remarks, *“The miracle of bringing the fish into the boat is the miracle of making the unworthy sinner fit to stay in the presence of God.”*

Now your own call to serve God was probably not quite this dramatic. I can say that my call into the ministry would not be nearly as interesting of a story as these. But God has called me, and He has called you. He has reached down to us in the waters of Holy Baptism and made us His own. He has cleanses us from our sins, speaking the assurance of the forgiveness of sins every time we hear the words of the Absolution and as the Communion elements are distributed. We are being equipped as we pray, read the Bible, worship, and live out our

faith. As we sang in our hymn of the day, *There Is a Balm in Gilead*, there are times when we are discouraged and think our work is in vain. We don't think we can do great things for God because we can't preach like Peter or pray like Paul. But the hymn also tells us that the Holy Spirit is with us, Jesus is our friend, and God is the source of all the knowledge we need. Even if you are not the most eloquent preacher, we all can speak the essential message of Jesus, that He died for all.

And notice that in both Isaiah and Luke there is evidence of this change that God has worked. Forgiveness and faith are transformative as we become new creatures in Christ. The voice of the Lord came to Isaiah and asks in verse 8, "*Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*" Isaiah is no longer hanging his head, thinking he is too sinful to do anything for God. He is not looking around the room for someone else to point to, "How about him, Lord?" No, his simple and faith-filled answer is this: "*Here I am; send me.*" May our response be the same.

Jesus says to Simon Peter in verse 10 of Luke 5, "*Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men.*" You can also read a shorter version of the calling of these disciples in St. Matthew 4 and Mark 1. In Mark 1:17 the wording of what Jesus says is directed more to the group, "*Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.*" Notice that the emphasis is not on the skills that Peter, Andrew, James, or John possess. It says, "*I will make you become fishers of men.*" This is how it works. Yes, we bring our God-given gifts, talents, and abilities as we are each individually gifted. But the transformative power brought by God is what makes us a new creation, one that is Spirit-filled and Spirit-led to witness of the Gospel.

Isaiah would follow God in the mission that he was called to. It would not be easy. Isaiah was from a wealthy and important family. His new mission would bring opposition and danger-rather than a life of privilege. And in Luke 5:11 it says, *“they forsook all, and followed him.”* So Peter, along with his brother Andrew and their business partner brothers of James and John would just up and leave their fishing boats in the Sea of Galilee (also know as Gennesaret as it is named in our text) and travel with this rabbi who during His ministry had no permanent home and also faced opposition. But they were “just fisherman”, what did they have to lose? A lot, actually. Three of the four would later die as martyrs for the faith. But in the short term, they were leaving their business-the way that they put food on the table and paid their bills behind. And this was a fairly successful operation. True, fisherman were blue-collar and not the intellectual elite. However, like many jobs today, if you are willing to get your hands dirty you can make a good living. Their business was profitable as the Bible tells us that John even had a second home in Jerusalem and knew the high priest (John 18:15). Dropping their nets and abandoning their boats was no small step of faith. May we be as willing to follow God, whatever the cost and wherever it leads.

We know that we are sinful people. We know that based on our own merits, we have no business being “hired” into the Kingdom of God. But we Christians also know that we are forgiven people. Through the redemption won by Christ on Calvary’s cross, our sins are forgiven. The hot coal of God’s refining fire has touched our lips. The dark nights of frustration at the lack of a catch have been replaced by overflowing nets

that come with the light of the arrival of Jesus. Unqualified no more, He has called us and equipped us. We have been called as soldiers of the cross and we arise as we will sing to close the Service, "*By the banner still unfurled, Still unsheathed the Spirit's Sword; Spread Thy Word in all the world; Let thy kingdom come, O Lord.*"

Amen.