

Just As I Am...
Menno Mennonite Church
February 9, 2025

Purpose: To declare the grace-filled call to discipleship in Christ.

Message: As disciples of Christ, we are called to follow not in judgment, but in grace.

Scripture: Luke 5:1-11 (Focus text), Isaiah 6:1-2a, 3-8 (please read)

Synopsis: We love the words calling the disciples to come and follow. It is so clean, simple, and forthright. We began looking at discipleship with these words, and we end here too. How desperately do we want to make these words apply for us as well. But often, we are like Peter disclaiming the right to be in communication, let alone relationship with the figure of Christ who does the calling. We follow, sure. But often it is discipleship in the name of righteousness and the hope of grace in the end; that we SHOULD follow, not that we expect to follow. We fail to see it is because of our nature, both good and bad, that Jesus calls us to follow, and in following we learn more of what we are called to be in the full grace of the God who calls and changes us.

Luke 5:1-11 CEB

One day Jesus was standing beside Lake Gennesaret when the crowd pressed in around him to hear God's word.

² Jesus saw two boats sitting by the lake. The fishermen had gone ashore and were washing their nets.

³ Jesus boarded one of the boats, the one that belonged to Simon, then asked him to row out a little distance from the shore.

Jesus sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

⁴ When he finished speaking to the crowds, he said to Simon, "Row out farther, into the deep water, and drop your nets for a catch."

⁵ Simon replied, "Master, we've worked hard all night and caught nothing. But because you say so, I'll drop the nets."

⁶ So they dropped the nets and their catch was so huge that their nets were splitting.

⁷ They signaled for their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They filled both boats so full that they were about to sink.

⁸ When Simon Peter saw the catch, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Leave me, Lord, for I'm a sinner!"

⁹ Peter and those with him were overcome with amazement because of the number of fish they caught.

¹⁰ James and John, Zebedee's sons, were Simon's partners and they were amazed too.

Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid. From now on, you will be fishing for people."

¹¹ As soon as they brought the boats to the shore, they left everything and followed Jesus

The way we are is hard to pin down. Human nature in its moving to-and-fro takes on a lot of different shapes. Depending on the day, the moment and how we are within it can influence what we might say when asked by degrees, but by in large it is a fairly consistent diagnosis. People are either generally good or persistently broken, and each individual is given to speak on side of the coin or the other. On the one hand we are often far better than we think. We possess a beauty and presence that is based on who we basically are. We all possess the basic spark of the divine, and that is always good. We are in trouble indeed when we succumb to the temptations of classifying people as less than what they are: Children of God; even the ones we are not given to trust or like. But it is bigger than that. We can be generous to a fault. Unless we are given reasons not to be, we are basically given to being warm and hospitable. There lies great potential inside most everyone with a capacity for love, sharing and goodness. Many of those we might find cold and self-centered may be that way because they have been hurt, wounded, and fear that they may yet again. We don't always look good, but we are. Many of us are also wonderfully awkward for all of that, but that is another story.

Of course that is not all we are. We must also hold the other side of the coin too. Just as we possess the capacities that we have for good, we also hold the capacity too for evil. We are sinners. I am a sinner; you are a sinner too. That doesn't get spoken from this pulpit too often or too loudly, for good reason, but that does not mean it is untrue. Paul can be paraphrased as he writes to the Romans, "the question is not whether you are a sinner; the question is what is your particular sin." Just as we all possess a piece of the greater soul, we also possess a piece of the petty soul too. Inside here resides pettiness, selfishness, jealousy and the capability of fear and the anger that is never terribly far from the surface. Any reasonable self assessment needs to acknowledge this even if it is not our favorite thing to consider. We are reasonably pick to select the faults we see outside us, but that doesn't mean we don't also know the faults, thoughts, and downright broken nature in ourselves. Our own sense of self can be haunted by the shadows that we alone carry; that we so often try to hide least others see what is inside. We can even break down to the point where that is all we see about ourselves and the world at all.

Please understand: neither of these polarities are entirely true, and each can lead to problems if engaged to the exclusion of all else. Of course, the reality is that we are really both of these at the same time. We are better than we think we are yet at the same time often worse than what we generally maintain. There is a lot of deep and complicated psychology that goes

into which narrative becomes your preferred way of understanding the world and yourself. But we all know deep down that try though we might we stand in the need of grace even if we may wonder if we actually deserve it. We are far better than we often give ourselves credit for, and far more inclined to that which we wish we were not than we generally suppose. Let me be clear: Everyone needs grace no matter what. It is not up to us who receives grace and who does not, even if that happens to be the person you find on the inside. Grace is that which Jesus offers fully and freely to all who are willing to accept it to themselves.

We are no different when it comes to faith. We read this story of Jesus calling the disciples to come and follow, and we take on the characters of the text. If you are anything like me, you probably found yourself understanding most easily Simon Peter. Not only does Luke's Peter basically become the stand-in for all things human, we also understand the calculation that was going on in his head. Here he is, minding his own business when he encounters Jesus, this teacher who comes by with some odd commands. He has seen and known teachers in his day, but it turns out that this Jesus has a knack for talking to seafood (which is sure to get the attention of fisherman). So the measure is relative to Jesus, a test that no one can really hope to get right, and he becomes utterly self-conscious of how bad he really can be. Who among us would not argue "No Lord, you can't mean me. I can't follow. I am not good enough. Go away." I know that I do. When we hear Jesus' invitation to the work of following, most often we find ourselves all-too-aware of the negative pieces of our human nature, playing the role of the unworthy.

But we don't stop there. Not only do we join in Simon's finding ourselves unfit for the task of following Jesus, but we also add things to the call to discipleship that quite simply are not there to justify that opinion. Like an expectation that we really should be good enough before we can follow after Jesus. Or the assumption that the point of being a disciple is to deny the negative parts of our personalities, pretending that they do not exist in order to be sufficiently qualified to become fishers of others. We make our calling predicated on our being adequate somehow, a level we are unlikely to achieve. We can take on that in following we might earn enough credit in the heavenly bank to earn recognition as a true disciple if and only if we are sufficiently righteous. This is our fear talking, not Jesus. Jesus just invites us to follow, and to put away our fear, our pre-occupation with who we think we ought to be as a disciple. Instead, we are given the challenging call to simply come as we are and follow in order to be more like Christ. Jesus knows human nature. Jesus understands the human condition far better than we

ever can and will. Jesus calls us just as we are not just to be healed and made whole, but calls us too to respond to that healing to be reminded that we are enough and we are invited to come and follow Christ not in fashion of what we wear, what we read or what we say or not say, but realistically and finally within the whole of the world and in all of life.

We are invited to the challenging task of discipleship, to following after Jesus in living the way of the kingdom, in being shaped to be more like Christ AS WE ARE. The invitation is there for who we are. Not with precondition. Not with expectation. Not with Judgment. But with the gracious promise that in following we will know ourselves more truly, live more deeply, and become more and more who God created us to be, establishing God's kingdom along the way. We so deeply want to make our faithfulness and our good ethical selves to be what qualifies us for consideration as a disciple, allowing our performance to be our qualification. We can control that; at least we can try. But that is not the case. God knows who we are better than we know ourselves, seeing through all of our masks and pretenses and still calls us by grace to a new life of grace for ourselves and for the sake of our world each and every day. We Anabaptists so want to be the church in perfection that we forget that the church cannot ever be perfect, because we are not perfect, and we are the church. We are called not to aptitude or competence, only to following; only to receiving and extending grace.

This is a bit of hard pill to swallow. Not least because that is not how we want to know and experience grace in the world. We are far more given to making the work of discipleship about becoming better more adequate people, putting on the righteous self as we deny the sinful self. Of course we do this, of course we are moved to grow and change along the way. Of course we each know where we might still do more. But these changes are the symptoms of grace, displaying the results of God's good works in us far more than the entrance exam we need to pass in order to qualify to be part of the thing in the first place. Discipleship is not just one more mask for us to put on, one more role for us to play at being in the world. It takes us just as we are, but gracefully, ultimately, hopefully, amazingly does not leave us as we are, but will make us into something that we have never expected or experienced along the way.

The invitation that called Simon from his boat and gave him a new name is the same invitation we ourselves are invited into each and every day. Among that we are invited to leave behind is our illusions of who we are and who we ought to be. We are invited to recognize that deny it though we would like to we are the both and. We are good and bad, generous and selfish,

big-hearted and petty, gracious and bitter, forgiving and resentful, hospitable and cold, full of grace and full of sin; all at the same time. We can remain dangerously blind to both, unaware of our loveliness, denying of our failures.

We are invited to leave these illusions behind. Recognizing the both and nature of our discipleship possesses a certain freedom. In the end of it all, we are beloved sinners. We are called to follow, leaving even our favorite illusions about ourselves behind too.

God's grace will always catch us in ways which we are least prepared, often in the places we are less inclined to think in need of grace. But the marvelous thing is the God takes us, leads, us, changes us and loves us, holding all of us in loving hands. With this invitation, how can we not follow?