

“Calling to New Life”

Luke 5, 6, 7

February 10, 2008

The Rev. Christine Chakoian

First Presbyterian Church

Lake Forest, Illinois

Since Christmas we have been walking with Jesus through his early life, his formative youth and young adulthood, and the launch of his mission at his inaugural teaching back home. Today, as we begin the season of Lent, we start a new chapter in Jesus' life: his life-work as an adult.

In the weeks ahead we will engage in Jesus' agenda as it unfolds in the gospel of Luke:

Calling people to new life; then

Preparing leaders;

Teaching through parables;

Inviting everyone to the table;

Calling for righteousness;

Confronting evil; and

Bringing people to new life.

It is worth noting that the first and last things he accomplishes are the same: bringing people new life. It is, if you will, his overriding agenda.

Before we hear today's scripture lessons read and interpreted, I want to acknowledge that we usually hear these stories one at a time: for example, Jesus calling the fishermen who leave everything behind ...or the leper begging Jesus to be healed. That has led preachers, including me, to make sweeping generalizations about Jesus based on one particular story or another. In fact, in the opening encounters in Jesus' ministry, he encounters people in very different ways. Listen for the many ways that Jesus calls people into new life.

SCRIPTURE (Luke 5:1-11)

read by Reverend Corey Nelson

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When Jesus had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon

Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

DRAMA (Simon the Fisherman)

portrayed by Doug Valassis

I didn't ask him to come into my boat. He didn't even ask – he just got in! Then he told me to push out from the shore so he could teach. I thought, why not? So I sat in my boat, mending my net, and listened to him – he was pretty amazing. And then he said the craziest thing. He told me to push out even farther, into deep water, and to cast my nets for a catch. Now, my crew had been fishing all night – there was nothing in that lake. But, again I thought, OK, why not? What have I got to lose? And then it got really creepy: we caught so many fish that our nets started to tear, and when we brought in the haul our boats started to sink. It was bizarre, and all of us guys were terrified. But Jesus just laughed. "Fish are nothing. You want to see something? Come with me and fish for people – that's where the challenge is." So right then and there we left our nets, our boats, everything, and we followed him. If you'd have asked me the day before if I would leave my business behind in order to serve this Jesus guy, I would have said you were nuts. But I have no regrets. Well, maybe one. I've had the hardest time explaining this to my wife!

SCRIPTURE (Luke 5:12-17)

read by Rev. Don Dempsey (9); Amy Pagliarella (11)

Once, when Jesus was in one of the cities, there was a man covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." Then Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I do choose. Be clean." Immediately the leprosy left him. And he ordered him to tell no one. "Go," he said, "and show yourself to the priest, and as Moses commanded, make an offering for your cleansing, for a testimony to them." But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.

DRAMA (the Leper)

portrayed by Cindy Dudley

Simon may not have invited Jesus in ... but me, I was begging for him to help me.

If Simon Peter had a successful fishing business, I was on the other side of the scale. I wasn't welcome anywhere.

You see, when you get leprosy, you don't belong anymore.

You don't belong in your family; you don't belong in the church. **YOU ARE BANISHED!**

So you should have seen the priest's face when I arrived, grinning, at the door. He knew my family ... especially my father, who had helped to build the parish hall.

This was the priest who had confirmed the diagnosis, the priest who had sent me from the sanctuary, never to return, asking God to 'have mercy' on my soul ... the kind of thing you'd say to a criminal en route to the gallows.

But here I was back ... seven years later, presenting myself as cured.

He didn't know what to say. He didn't know which book to look for or which page to turn. He had only been taught the ritual to send lepers away.

He had never learned how to receive them back. The priest looked offended that what our religion had turned away.... God had decided to embrace. As for me, I'm just grateful. Jesus was my last hope.

SCRIPTURE (Luke 5:17-26)

read by Reverend Corey Nelson

One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting near by ... and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed person on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. When he saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." The scribes and the Pharisees protested, "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins?" But Jesus said, which is easier: to say, "Your sins are forgiven you," or to say, "Stand up and walk?" But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" – he said to the one who was paralyzed – "I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home." Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen strange things today."

DRAMA (Paralytic)

portrayed by Joy Guscott-Mueller

I didn't ask Jesus for help. Not that I didn't want it. But by the time my friends carried me to the house where Jesus was teaching, the place was jammed. It wasn't a huge house to begin with – just one large room, but I tell you, the doorways, the open windows, people were spilling out into the streets. I told my friends to take me home – there was no way we'd make our way in through the crowds. If it had been up to me, we would have turned around ... but they wouldn't be stopped. You won't believe what they did. They climbed onto the roof – with me on the stretcher – and I was sure that they would drop me. I kept protesting: stop! Don't do it! But they climbed onto the roof and then they cut a hole in the thatches, and lowered me down, right in front of Jesus. And Jesus – he didn't even bat an eye. He just chuckled at the chutzpah of my friends. And he said to me, Because of their faith, your sins are forgiven. Stand up, pick up your stretcher, and walk.

SCRIPTURE (Luke 5:27 – 32) read by Rev. Don Dempsey (9); Amy Pagliarella (11)
 After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up, left everything, and followed him. Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus answered, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

DRAMA (Tax Collector) portrayed by Bob Shaw
 I’m a different case altogether. First of all, Jesus came to me; I didn’t go to him. Secondly, I was outcast too, like the leper – only mine wasn’t a physical uncleanness. I was despised because I worked for the Romans ... and I figured I couldn’t be more detested than I already was, so like all the tax collectors, I skimmed a little off the top for myself. Well, more than a little. Nobody wanted to see me coming. I was probably the only wealthy man in town that people didn’t fawn over. But I got over it. I had my money to keep me company, and I lived a great life – hey, why not enjoy what you have?

Until Jesus – Jesus decided to choose me. Nobody had ever chosen me before. He came right up to my tax booth and talked to me like a human being. He didn’t come asking for money; he invited me to follow him. He didn’t make me stop being a tax collector; he didn’t judge my work; he didn’t tell me to sell my beautiful house. He just wanted me to join him – to sit and have dinner with him. He wasn’t even ashamed to be seen with me. I couldn’t believe it. Never – never in my entire life has anyone wanted me. I can’t tell you how good it feels.

SCRIPTURE (Luke 6:12-16) read by Reverend Corey Nelson
 Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Reverend Christine Chakoian

We've heard four different stories, four very different stories of very real human beings handed new life by Jesus.

Simon Peter and the fishermen ... they didn't go looking for Jesus. Jesus came to them. They were successful working people. They didn't ask him into their boats. But they were so overwhelmed by the power of what happened that they left everything behind to follow him. They experienced life so far beyond what they imagined that everything paled in comparison.

That's how it is for some of us. We aren't discontent ... we're not unhappy ... we're satisfied with the way life is going. But something intrudes when we least expect it – and suddenly everything that mattered before doesn't anymore. Maybe we experience what it means to be really loved, and we can't wait to shed the self-protective armor that seemed so essential just a day ago. Maybe we are exposed to a family in Africa or a child in North Chicago that is poor, really, really poor, and we find ourselves involved and utterly committed to their lives. Or maybe we hear a teacher or preacher or politician rouse us to action in a way that surprises the daylights out of us. Or maybe we have an old-fashioned experience of the holy, smack out of the blue, where the skies open or time freezes or our hearts are strangely warmed. Some of us can understand completely how it was for the fishermen who left everything to follow Jesus into their new life.

But the leper ... the leper was different. Jesus didn't come to him; he came looking for Jesus. He was isolated -- not just sick but ritually unclean, disowned and banished from society. He had nothing to leave behind ... nothing to lose and everything to gain. When he met Jesus, he wasn't looking for the next best philosophy. He was desperate to have any life at all. When Jesus touched him, it was the first time he'd been touched since his diagnosis. And in that touch, he found new life.

And that's how it is for some of us. We came to Jesus when we were desperate, and he was there for us. Maybe it was the time we sank into debt so deep we didn't see a way to get out. Maybe it was when depression took us to a place so bleak and overwhelming that we didn't see how we'd get out of bed in the morning, or worse. Maybe it was long ago when our marriage was falling apart, or we discovered we were gay, or we felt like abortion was our only option, and we were afraid we'd be disowned by the church and everyone who loved us. Maybe we know what it means to feel like a leper ... to feel utterly alone and reach out to the Lord in fear or shame or weakness, and feel the warmth of his hand touching us, pulling us back to life.

And the paralytic ... his a different story yet. He didn't go to Jesus ... his friends took him. Unable to get there on his own, unable to take care of himself, utterly dependent on everybody else ... he would have given up long ago. But his friends -- they were insistent. When his tenacious friends dropped him through the roof he gained not just his legs but the life-giving knowledge of the love of his friends.

That's how it is for some of us. When we couldn't or wouldn't seek help for ourselves, someone who loved us did. Maybe you know what it means to recovering alcoholics who were saved by friends or family who staged an intervention. Or maybe you can relate to the kids who wouldn't ever have made it to Sunday School if their neighbor hadn't brought them. Maybe you've felt the invisible arms of strangers praying for you when you were very sick. Or maybe you have, as I have, been in a place where you feel so ugly and pathetic and unlovable and your sister or brother or spouse or best friend tenaciously loves you back to life again. Maybe you know what it means to have somebody else's faith make you whole again.

And then there's Levi the tax collector ... the tax collector who didn't have friends to turn to, and who wasn't humble enough to ask Jesus for help. So Jesus came to him ... even though Levi was socially despised – despised because he worked for the oppressor, and because his money came from bribes and corruption. When Jesus called him, interestingly, Levi didn't leave behind his work ... he didn't lose the stigma of being a tax collector ... he didn't give up his house. But he left behind his lucrative, illegal practices. And he left behind his self-loathing. And most of all, he left behind his social isolation. When Jesus sat down to eat with him, Levi gave a banquet for all the other tax collectors ... who were ready to give up their deadly isolation too.

And that's how it is for some of us too. When we had every material possession we could ever want – houses, luxury cars, art collections, toys ... when we had every experience money could buy – travel, adventures, illegal pleasures if we wanted ... when we had people at our beck and call to satisfy our every need ... when we had everything but love. It is perhaps the loneliest place in the universe to be. To own everything, but have none of what really matters. And maybe you know what it means for Jesus to have a place for you, what it means for Jesus to invite you to the table, what it means for Jesus to give you the gift of this, his brothers and sisters, to call your own, and love you. Maybe you know that too.

As you look back on your own life, or maybe at your life right now, the question is this: If you were to write your own story of meeting up with Jesus, how would it go? Did you come to him, or did he come to you, or did your friends bring you when you could not do it on your own?

Jesus doesn't come to everyone in the same way. The ways we encounter Christ vary radically ... they are as unique as the individuals we are. But there is one thing we all have in common when we meet him. When he meets us, he brings us life ... he brings us a new life ... more than we could ask ... and more than we could have ever imagined.