

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

February 6, 2022

The Company We Keep

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Each of the Gospel writers does a good job of telling us right from the beginning of their writings what their priorities are in the Gospel they are sharing. I've laid this out for you when it comes to the Gospel of John; the entire Gospel has to be read through the lens of the prologue, the first 18 verses of John 1. Luke does this too! I wonder if you've noticed some of the themes the author has been laying out for us in these first few chapters.

Think about the major points made thus far in Luke. We've heard powerful songs from Zechariah, Mary, and Simeon; and they all share themes of salvation and the upheaval of the status quo. We've heard quite a bit so far about the lowly, the hungry, and the oppressed. Then Jesus begins his ministry with words from Isaiah that continue this theme: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."¹

These themes say something powerful about God's priorities and concern. The Incarnation itself expresses these same priorities and concern as well. Think about it, God's Beloved Son could have been born to anyone. Jesus could have been born in the opulence of the Roman Emperor's palace, or in any number of other powerful and wealthy households in the Empire (or outside of it). But Luke makes a point of Christ being born to a poor carpenter and his wife in an unimportant region of one of the smaller provinces of the great Roman Empire.

So we've been given powerful words about God's priorities, we understand that the very Incarnation, God taking on human flesh and form, is an

¹ Luke 4:17-19 (quoting Isaiah 61:1-2a), NRSV translation

expression of God's priorities. It should come as no surprise then that we see these priorities made manifest in just about every action Christ takes in Luke's Gospel. Including our text today, the call of the first disciples.

Just as Jesus could have been born in any powerful household, he could have chosen powerful people to be his disciples as well. If he can cause a catch of fish so large as to sink boats, I'm sure he could have impressed other, less provincial people with different signs and miracles. But he doesn't choose the wealthy, the powerful, or the influential to be his disciples; he chooses poor, common folk to lead and to teach. If that's not a statement of priorities, I don't know what is!

Perhaps this story doesn't impact us today because we don't understand the nuances of what's going on. Traditionally Israelite children would go to Hebrew school starting around age 6 in order to learn to read the Torah. This basic education would last until a child was around 10, and was structured around memorizing the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) and then most of those students would begin to learn a trade as an apprentice (often in the family business). But the most exceptional students would continue to learn the other books of the Hebrew Bible, memorizing most of it. That education would continue until they were an adult. Some of these students would leave to become apprentices, but the brightest would stay to learn more. Eventually, the best of the best would set out to find a Rabbi to learn from directly until they, themselves, were knowledgeable enough to become Rabbis.

So the fact that the men Jesus calls to discipleship all come from other trades (fishermen, tax collectors, etc.), means that at some point they were determined to not be smart enough to become disciples to a Rabbi, or it means their family was so poor that they needed their child to learn a trade as early as possible to support the family. Jesus, incarnated into a poor, common family goes on to call people from poor, common families to be his disciples. And guess where Jesus will send those poor, common disciples? That's right, to other, poor, common folk. St. Vincent de Paul lays out what this means beautifully:

"Since Christ willed to be born poor, he chose for himself disciples who were poor. He made himself the servant of the poor and shared their poverty. He went so far as to say that he would consider every deed which either helps or harms the poor as done for or against himself. Since God

surely loves the poor, he also loves those who love the poor. For when one person holds another dear, he also includes in his affection anyone who loves or serves the one he loves. That is why we hope that God will love us for the sake of the poor. So when we visit the poor and needy, we try to understand the poor and weak. We sympathize with them so fully that we can echo Paul's words: I have become all things to all men."²

Jesus clearly chooses the company he keeps very intentionally. He chose to surround himself with the poor, the oppressed, the leper, the prostitute, the blind, the lame, the fisherman, the tax collector, the outcast, and the sinner. And if we truly want to walk the Way of Christ, we should probably choose the company we keep with similar priorities.

This isn't easy and it certainly won't be comfortable. But I have generally found that the things most worth doing require something from me. Perhaps that's the biggest part of the claim that the Holy Spirit lays on us. The Way of Christ, the claims made on us by God, all have to do with growth in faith and in love. Growth occurs when we move outside our comfort zones. Growth occurs when we encounter diversity of thought and experiences. Growth occurs when we leave what we're used to, like nets and boats, and follow the one who knows us best. Follow the one who is the very source of love and faith, the very source of growth.

Are we prepared to leave our nets and boats? To step out onto the water in faith? Are we willing to follow where Christ leads? Even if that means going places that makes us uncomfortable? Are we prepared to welcome the sort of people into our communities and lives that Christ would want us to? Can we surrender to this claim on our lives that Christ makes the way that Simon, Andrew, James and John surrender to it? I sure hope so!

And remember the goal of this Way, for it is of greater worth than we can even imagine. The goal of the Way of Christ is the kingdom of God. The new way of living and being that allows everyone to be who they truly are. A way of living in community that acknowledges the blessings of connection and relationship as being far more important than much of what the world tells us to prize. We are called to catch people into community, into relationship with God and with ourselves. We are called to live into the

² excerpt from the writings of St. Vincent de Paul (Epist. 2546: Correspondance, entretiens, documents, Paris 1922-1925, 7)

Way of Christ, the Way of welcome and grace, the Way of love and faith.
What amazing bait! Amen.

- Pastor Jon Nelson