

Our Discipleship

Luke 5:1-11

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In his commentary, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel*, the Jesuit scholar Brendan Byrne writes about this story that, "The context of the call is humanity thirsting for life. The disciples are to become Jesus' apprentices in the project of drawing people to the hospitality of God."

We are disciples of Jesus—those who follow on the Way. And that Way is about extending God's hospitality to all people, because all people are thirsting for abundant life.

Byrne continues, "The call communicates the sense of 'capturing' people with the word and bringing them to the more abundant life of the kingdom of God."

So, we fulfill our call when we bring more people into God's abundant life.

This Epiphany season we are exploring the implications of our baptisms upon our identity and our ethics. Back in 1982 an international, ecumenical gathering of the World Council of Churches meeting in Lima, Peru adopted the statement *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, which was later approved by many different denominations, including our own, as an expression of our shared understanding.

In the section on baptism, there is a description of the "life-long growth into Christ" that should be true for all Christians. Here's what the document says:

As they grow in the Christian life of faith, baptized believers demonstrate that humanity can be regenerated and liberated. They have a common responsibility, here and now, to bear witness together to the Gospel of Christ, the Liberator of all human beings. . . . baptism, as a baptism into Christ's death, has ethical implications which not only call for personal sanctification, but also motivate Christians to strive for the realization of the will of God in all realms of life.

As followers of Jesus, our commitment is to continue to grow in faith to become more like Jesus. And we do that by sharing in our common responsibility to participate in the liberation of humanity. Our spiritual growth is not simply about the improvement of our own character, but our responsibility to manifest the way of God in all areas of our lives.

So on the lakeshore that day, Jesus was boldly calling Simon Peter, James and John to a mission of high responsibility. Maybe that's why Simon initially asks Jesus to go away. Simon realizes the power and authority of Jesus, but isn't sure that he wants this call on his life.

And in that way, Simon Peter is pretty similar to most figures in the Biblical story who receive a call from God. They initially try to get out of it. Usually by stating their own inferiority for the task.

Yet, maybe this self-realization is an essential part of the call?

In his commentary Brendan Byrne writes that it is “just at this moment of painful self-knowledge and truth that the commission comes.” Only when Simon has realized his own “unworthiness and weakness” does Jesus call him.

Byrne concludes his commentary on this story by saying, “Only those who have plumbed their personal fragility in the context of God’s generosity are apt for leadership in the community that celebrates the hospitality of God.”

Those who are called examine themselves, realize their vulnerability, embrace it openly, and then offer themselves for service on behalf of humanity.

Yes, this special mark upon us by Jesus comes with high responsibility.

Next Sunday our guest preacher and forum presenter is Lawrence T. Richardson who pastors Linden Hills United Church of Christ in Minneapolis. Katie and I heard Lawrence speak last October in Des Moines at the annual meeting of the Iowa Conference. We were both impressed by him and found his story to be moving.

Lawrence has written a memoir entitled *I Know What Heaven Looks Like: A Modern Day Coming of Age Story*. I finished the book this week. Some of the passages were very difficult to read, because Lawrence had a harrowing childhood, affected by poverty, neglect, and abuse.

But his story is one of healing and overcoming obstacles, precisely because of his faith and his experience of God.

Early in the book he is the victim of abuse and is rescued by his paternal grandmother who brings him to church. This is a black church with an altar call and in that moment, he feels the urge to run down the aisle and throw himself upon the altar, where he breaks down crying. The pastor came to him and resting his hand upon Lawrence’s head said, “God sees your pain. I speak healing over you in the name of Jesus.”

Lawrence writes that it was this moment where he felt church as a place that could bring *him* peace. He felt closer to God than ever. And so he whispered, “I’m yours God, please take me.” This was his call.

That day, after worship, driving home with his grandmother, he asked her, “Granny, what happened to me on the altar today? Why couldn’t I stop crying—I didn’t feel sad?”

She responded, “You caught the Holy Spirit.”

Lawrence then asked, “How did I catch the Holy Spirit?”

Grandma then gave a little theology lesson, which shows some profundity on her part. “God is everywhere. But sometimes, if enough good energy—or what I like to call God-energy—is jumbled up in one place, you feel God so powerful that you can’t contain yourself. Some people sing, some people cry, some people dance, some people create—we all do different things when we catch the Spirit.”

Young Lawrence then asked, “How do we hold on to the Spirit once we catch it, so we don’t lose it?”

He writes that his grandma began to laugh as she said, "Baby, you don't hold the Spirit, the Spirit holds you. You can't control when or how the Spirit moves, but you can nurture the good that's inside of you so that you're always able to recognize the Spirit when it comes."

God wants to grab onto each of us, like both the fish and the fishermen in the Gospel of Luke and like Lawrence in his story. God wants us because God wants to give us a more abundant life. The call to that abundant life begins in self-realization and leads us outward into service to others. We receive the high responsibility of being agents of God's hospitality, bringing even more people into abundant life.

Let the Spirit grab hold of us today.