

“What Makes Us Worthy?”  
February 6, 2022  
Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

I’ve often wondered how certain figures in the Bible are chosen to do the things they’re called to do. Was Isaiah the only person qualified to speak on God’s behalf? Had someone else been in the room at the time would they have reacted to what happened in the same way? Or would they have even seen it? Isaiah himself doesn’t seem to think he’s the right choice for this call. When he tells God he is “a man of unclean lips,” he’s not making some heart wrenching confession or engaging in false modesty. I think he’s simply stating a fact.

Isaiah lives in a society that’s corrupt and even if he isn’t personally corrupt, he does benefit from it. He’s shaped by it, whether he wants to be or not. That’s a reality we all have to live with. In recent years we’ve been hearing a lot about racial inequities in our country; inequities that are easily proved statistically. And even though as a white person I’m disturbed by those inequities and would like to see them eliminated, I also benefit from them. It’s possible to want justice, while also acknowledging complicity with injustice. In fact, maybe that’s how healing begins.

So, we shouldn’t be surprised that Isaiah is quick to admit his unworthiness to stand in the presence of God. But how often, when you really think about characters from the Bible, how often is someone called because they’re worthy? Think of the heroes of our faith. Abraham is crafty and at times argumentative; Jacob is a liar and a thief; Moses committed murder. Peter denies even knowing Jesus; Judas betrayed him; all the disciples are portrayed as obtuse and confused. You might notice, by the way, those are all men. For the most part, women in the Bible are noble and trustworthy and brave. But that may be a topic for another sermon...

In this story from Luke’s gospel, Simon is more in the mold of Isaiah when he realizes Jesus is more than he seems. We’re not told how they know each other, but Jesus has already been to Simon’s home where he healed his mother-in-law. Capernaum, where Simon lives, is sort of Jesus’ second home. He finds acceptance and support there, unlike in his own hometown of Nazareth. And when he goes to the shore to teach and asks Simon to put his boat back in the water after a long and disappointing, probably exhausting, night of fishing Simon is more than happy to accommodate him.

But that’s very different from pledging his life to follow him. Simon Peter would never have thought himself qualified for that. And when he’s faced with a miraculous haul of fish, he knows he’s not worthy. Why would Jesus be so interested in him? Peter has always embodied a certain authenticity and open-heartedness. He may not always be the sharpest knife in the drawer but he is devoted. And as Luke shows us in this story, Peter knows who he is.

And maybe it’s that self-knowledge, that self-awareness, that explains why certain people are called. Awareness of our shortcomings, our faults, our sins, is the first step toward

dependence on God. Our society puts a lot of emphasis on independence. We're supposed to be self-sufficient, relying only on our own efforts to succeed. To support that we concoct all sorts of myths about self-made people who lift themselves by their own bootstraps. Worthiness is something you earn through your hard work. It's as if each of us is an island unto ourselves and we don't dare admit our unworthiness. Someone like Peter is considered weak; people like Isaiah, who admit their complicity are considered fools.

But what we discover over and over in scripture is worthiness isn't something anyone can earn. God doesn't call people because they're qualified. What makes people worthy of God's call is their willingness to respond, in spite of knowing how unqualified they are. And it may be those who are most aware of their unworthiness are most useful to God. Jesus could have gone to many other villages or towns to find qualified disciples. Capernaum was a poor fishing village, far from the centers of education in Judea. But it was a place where people worked hard to eke out a living. A place where men would fish all night, catching nothing, yet still be willing to put their boat back in the water to accommodate a visiting teacher. The people of Capernaum were willing to respond when Jesus called. And that's all God wants from any of us.

We aren't perfect. We make all kinds of mistakes. Sometimes we're guilty of terrible sins. Yet God continues to call us. God will not give up on us. All that's asked is our humble awareness of the ways we fall short and our willingness to respond in spite of them. In the hymn "Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy," there's a line that I think sums up our dilemma best: *"Come, ye weary, heavy laden, lost and ruined by the fall; if you tarry till you're better, you will never come at all."* What are we waiting for? Are you waiting until you're certain there's nothing in you of darkness? We can always find an excuse not to respond when we're called. And we'll never reach a place where we're free of the influence of injustice around us. But what we can do is face our complicity honestly and commit ourselves to God's call to compassion and justice in spite of our imperfections.

What we learn from Isaiah and Peter, and so many others in scripture, is God isn't looking for perfection. God is looking for us. That's why when we celebrate communion, as we're about to do this morning, we can come to the table joyfully, confidently. This isn't a place of judgment or criticism. It's where God meets us with the abundance revealed to Peter and his partners; where God meets us with the steadfast love and forgiveness revealed to Isaiah. At this table God calls us to get off the sidelines and participate in God's business in the world. And all God asks is we say, "Yes!"

Amen