

Sermon: [Evangelism, Compassion]
Epiphany 5 C
Text: Gospel, Luke 5:1–11

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God loves you as you are. I think this is something most Christian people would agree on. God loves you *as you are*. But God *does not leave you as you are*. In the life of faith, the Holy Spirit becomes active in you. *Conversion* is a term meaning that *you change*. The Gospel *does something to you*. Your self-esteem, as a redeemed child of God, means that you are *not* a worthless failure, *or* a troubled, burdened soul who has lost your *way* in life. *Now*, you have direction. *Now*, you have purpose. God does not leave you *where* you are, either. *Now* you have a mission, you have a calling.

Today's Gospel reading is about Jesus calling his disciples. Calling them *away* from their "9 to 5" job, to do God's job. Their lives changed. Their self-understanding changed. They gave up everything to follow when they became the first recruits in the "Jesus movement."

In our own time, we have always accepted that there is a big difference between clergy and laity, between those who kept their day jobs, and those who answered The Call. So, the laity put their clergy on a pedestal... and then take shots at them to bring them down. The running joke when I grew up was that all the wives rushed home after worship to fix the main Sunday dinner. And what were the church women *servicing*? No matter what the *food* was at the Sunday noonday dinner, they always had "roast preacher."

So there is a difference between clergy and laity, of course. St. Paul saw it as a difference in function in the household of God, based on our different gifts. But the difference is less than you think. Both "clergy" and "laity" come from two ancient Greek words, *kleros* and *laos*. The *laos*, translated, are the people (of God). And we are all the people of God, whether ordained or not, whether priest, or bishop, or deacon or usher, or vestry member or "just us."

In 1 Peter, we are reminded that once we were nobodies, but now we are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who *called you* out of darkness into his marvelous light."

The other word *kleros* means "called." But we all—*all* of us who are people of God—are *called* to follow Jesus. We are *all* invited, empowered, equipped to respond to the *call* of Christ, enabled by the very changes that God makes in us when we hear and grasp the Gospel. We are *not* nobodies who are struggling to carry out a mission. We are a people who *have been changed* by the Holy Spirit, who are carrying out Christ's mission.

Why do so many members *here* give themselves, give their time so generously, to—for example—operate a Thrift Store? Is that responding to the call of Christ to give what we have, to be a neighbor, to make sacrifices which are pleasing to God? You bet.

So, in terms of differences, your priest is just as much a redeemed child of God as you are, a member of the same body of Christ, in accord with the grace of God, just as you are.

We are in the season of Epiphany, the proclamation or manifestation of Christ to the world. Epiphany is kind of "Discipleship 101," Outreach 101, Responsibility 101, as a follower of Jesus, a redeemed child of God, a convert to God's will in this world.

There used to be a time when this U.S. of America thought of itself as a *Christian* nation. When I was younger I thought: what was the point of evangelism, since everybody is already going to church?, kind of. But here in the *third* decade of the 21st century, the religious landscape once dominated by Catholics and Protestants (and of course some Jewish people and some others), that landscape is now seeing the rapid rise of *another* group, which social sciences have labeled the "nones." *Not* the sisters in their habits *or* street clothes. The "nones," as in, those who mark "none" for their religious faith.

I read an arresting article that referenced that and said a recent study is showing a *probable cause* for the increasing “nones” in America. It is likely because of the increasing influence of so-called “evangelical” Christians. If evangelical is the adjective that means directed toward evangelism—the telling of the Good News about Jesus— it seems that the more Evangelicals have become prominent in our society, the more “nones” are identifying as having nothing to do with the Christian church!

A major research project out of the Barna Group, for example, a few years back found that young people, ages 18–29, said that they can’t relate to Christians *because* “Christians do not resemble Jesus.” So, in some ways evangelism has been successful, because nearly everybody *knows about* Jesus, they know his story, his cross and suffering. They know that he cared, and healed, and taught, and fed the people. That he forgave people. But they *can’t* identify with the *Christian church*, because *Christians do not resemble caring, and healing, and feeding, and forgiving others*.

I confess to sometimes dipping my toe into Facebook, but like with cigarettes “I don’t inhale.” But recently I saw a meme posted that I had to copy down. A woman wrote: “I’m not avoiding church so I can live a life of debauchery,” she said. “I am avoiding church because I can’t make sense of the people *outside* the church *being kinder and more understanding* than those *inside* the church who gave me pat answers and shame, with a side of victim blaming, for 25 years.” If you will forgive my Facebook shorthand, OMG! Does that sting!

Evangelicals, sad to say, have shown that smug, self-justifying, privileged ways *do not* lead people *to* Christ but often lead them *away from Christ*. Or, as another person posted on Facebook a couple weeks ago, “I am tired of people running around with a mouthful of Scripture and a heart full of hate.”

These comments are things you and I have probably had “some scrapes with.” We *know we are not* perfect disciples. We confess our *sins*. But we usually *take umbrage* if an outsider lumps us in with all the other hypocrites. And we certainly don’t expect the preacher to *side with* the critics.

But my friends, it is part of our humility, and maybe a practice–run for the coming season of Lent, if we *reflect on whether we have a heart full of love, or not*. On whether we resemble Christ; whether we pray the prayer of St. Richard of Chichester almost 700 years ago:

Thanks be to you, our Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits which you have given us,
for all the pains and insults which you have borne for us.
Most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother,
may we know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly,
day by day. Amen.

And in our 21st century we live in a time with deliberate misinformation, false advertising, endless marketing, and a *din* silenced with the mute button. The Christian Church, or at least parts of it, have gotten in synch with this endless marketing, thinking, I guess, that America needs to hear more and more about Jesus, and while they’re at it *about God’s law, God’s temper, God’s wrath, and the final judgment*.

I learned something significant in my last parish about Evangelism, from my friends in the church basement. When I began serving there in 2004, there were three Alcoholics Anonymous groups meeting weekly downstairs. When others asked about space and time for other 12-step programs, I always said yes. And when I left my call 11 years later, there were 16 such groups meeting downstairs. Sometimes I would crash public meetings. Sometimes I was invited. Sometimes I wound up in long conversations standing in the corridor after an evening meeting. And I learned one of the traditions of

which A.A. and other groups are justifiably proud. They would say, “We grow by attraction, not by promotion.” A.A. does not advertise. They do not send out evangelists. They don’t try to catch fish like St. Peter. But their spiritual work begins, Step One, with the confession that their lives are out of control and that they need help.

Most of us here, willingly, participate in the Confession of Sins, even if we haven’t reflected deeply on what hurts and how we got into our particular mess, or whether our entire lives are “circling the drain.” But we know that Christ is our higher power, that God loves us as we are, but *when we are changed by that Higher Power*, we have a mission in the world. It is not a mission to give others pat answers, or shame with a “side” of victim blaming.” It is a mission from Jesus.

So in this season, one question remains: “How?” How do we *resemble* Christ instead of just *advertising* Christ? How do we communicate the Good News of Jesus to a culture that already knows Jesus enough to be bored by the “old, old story,” and to be amused by every witty, snarky comment about religion?

I think there is one way, and this works for both *kleros* and *laos*, for clergy and laity. Remember, *now* we have purpose. *Now* we have a mission, we have a calling. It works for all of us who are called, who are the people of God, who used to be nobodies. It doesn’t rely on advertising. It doesn’t need labels. It won’t generate headlines. We don’t even have to be articulate, or even *religious*. It doesn’t take special gear, or tactical training. We resemble Christ, we communicate *through compassion*. If the Gospel changes us, if God did not leave us where we were, if we have learned to love one another as Christ has loved us, then we learn by doing (thank you Cal Poly), we tell by showing. We show the love of God through compassion toward others. Maybe their lives *really are* circling the drain, or just momentarily lost. Maybe those people have *no time* to be spiritual because they are hungry and trying to survive. Maybe those people are *strangers, newcomers, foreigners, old—or very young— are poor, or in prison, or clawing their way out of addictions*. We *don’t* know whether it’s a Thrift Store, or a Steven’s Ministry, or People’s Kitchen, or a cup of hot coffee or cold water or a sack of groceries that will be the sign of compassion. We *do* know *there are no limits* to the lives God can change *through you*, if you practice, resemble, and live out the compassion of Christ. Amen?

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