

<Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; Matthew 4:12-23>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

About five or six years ago, a shift in the locker room of the Buffalo Bills began to take true form. For what felt like eternity atop eternity, their identity had been shaped around one primary reality: a team that was not good enough.

Not good enough to attract talented players. Not good enough to have a winning season. Not good enough to be competitive or taken seriously. Not good enough to be a playoff caliber team.

But then the shift began. As Sean McDermott not only arrived but began to establish himself, he coached the team to shift their thinking, reasserting to them they were not just a playoff-draught team, but rather, they were a playoff caliber team. And then, as that reality established itself and began to take root, McDermott pushed the thinking to the next step, that the Bills were not just playoff caliber but they were championship caliber.

That kind of cultural shift in thinking has stuck with me, and it occurs to me that it is something we need in the church, as well. I'm not going to stand here and tell you that you're championship caliber; I think you're great but our flag football team, if we had one, is not necessarily going to go win any Olympic medals. But I would remind each us - you, me, and all who join us in this work of proclaiming Jesus' gospel - we are *kingdom caliber*.

As we have been called and baptized into the life of faith and discipleship, we often get hung up on the "how to" of this calling. How do I respond when someone disagrees with me, or when they do something that I think is wrong? What do I do when I'm wrong, or what do I do when I'm right? How do I truly live as a disciple of Jesus, as one who is called to *kingdom caliber*?

It is easy to get caught up in seeking and determining the answers to questions such as these, and then debating them with and against others. Whole wars have been waged and fought of the difference of such answers, and the evidence of such disagreements is visible with each different steeple our eyes can see looking down the street. It is easy to get caught up in living and dying by our own interpretation of the answers to such questions, but our calling is, I believe, founded in something broader: the mindset, the way of thinking about who calls us, and who we are called to be.

First, it is imperative that we remember that it is God, through Christ and sustained by the Holy Spirit who calls us - *any* of us - into the life of faith and discipleship. We return each year to the calling of the first disciples to ground us in our own calling as disciples today. And in this calling, what we see most frequently is less of a performance-based to-do list, and more of an invitation to live into the mindset of a disciple.

Looking at this calling in Matthew's gospel we see a few notable aspects. Matthew places the calling of Simon and Andrew, and James and John, immediately after the reassertion of the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise that "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." The calling to discipleship is tied to the realization of the light of God's love and illumination coming bodily into the world, our world, our lives. As we are called, so, too, do we follow and join into that light; to live into a *kingdom caliber* mindset is to live as people of the light, ourselves.

It is important to note, as well, in this calling of the first disciples that the two sets of brothers "immediately" left their nets and their boats to follow. I've wondered at this, in the past, trying to determine what it was that Jesus said or promised that convinced them so immediately. Now, I wonder that it was not more evident to me sooner: these four did not immediately follow because of anything Jesus said, but because of who Jesus is.

When we find ourselves in the presence of a truly great person, or viewing an amazing piece of art, or hearing a magnificent symphony, we inherently know it. We can sense what is before us, and what we are experiencing. And such was likely the case for these first disciples, as well; finding themselves in the presence of Jesus, the light of God come into the world, they knew that there was no other path for them but to follow.

Then, and only then, according to Matthew's gospel, did the nature and practical aspects of discipleship begin to be introduced - teaching and proclaiming good news, healing the sick, uplifting the people. These things come in turn, but first comes the mindset of who we are called to be, and who we follow which makes any of it possible in the first place.

The call to discipleship is a call to view the light of Christ in our own life, first, and from that, to remember that we, too, are called to reflect that light. It is in this mindset, more than any of our actions, even, which will open us to live into the *kingdom caliber* to which we are called, the Kingdom of God which we proclaim and realize.

That can be daunting and challenging, but there is one last dynamic at play. By placing ourselves in the light of Christ, rather than being diminished by such a light we find that we, ourselves, are brightened, reflecting more and more that light which washes over us, too.

Our calling is to live into this light each and every day, in every aspect and facet of who we are. And I'll be the first to admit, that is sometimes a fearful reality to live into. It is easier to put our heads down, to go quietly along and work faithfully without notice. There is a time for that, too, but we should not let that approach, that mindset be what we default to. God, for the sake of the kingdom and the healing of the world - our lives, our communities, our hearts - calls us to much more than quietly going about in faith.

Such an idea was used by Nelson Mandela in his 1994 inaugural speech, but he borrowed it from author Marianne Williamson, who wrote,

*"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light not our darkness which that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? "Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world...We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. "It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."*

Being light is not what we do when we follow Christ; rather, it is who we are, and in following Christ, we live more fully into that true identity. The more we follow, and the more closely we follow, the more we live into our true selves. And the more we do this, the more others around us are able to do the same.

So let your light so shine, and follow Christ who is the source of our light and life. To this we are called, and in this our *kingdom mindset* will become lived reality, for the glory of God and the healing of the world. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*