

<Genesis 12:1-9; Psalm 33:1-12; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26>

*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.*

You will probably remember that I have spoken before about growing up at Camp Duffield, not even an hour from here, as a child and a young adult. As a child, I would attend a week of summer camp each year alongside friends from home and friends that I only knew through camp. As I grew, I eventually volunteered as a counselor-in-training and then served on the summer staff in a myriad of positions over the course of five summers. All that is to say, Duffield is a place that has always felt like a second home to me, familiar enough to walk in the dark and navigate all the paths and terrain.

So you can imagine my joy when, one fall as a high school student, my home church was participating in a weekend youth retreat with several other churches, even some from the big city of Buffalo! I was excited to share my home away from home with others who hadn't been before, to reconnect with some old friends who I usually only saw in the summer, and - because I was still a high school boy - to potentially impress a cute coed or two with my knowledge of the grounds.

All those hopes seemed to intersect when our group went for a hike along those familiar trails on Saturday afternoon, and I ended up as the de facto trail guide, leading my fellow compadres through the woods that I loved so much each summer. The potential before me was unlimited. Except, as you might imagine, a forest with trails which look familiar in the full vibrancy of summer looks much different in the fall as trees begin to shed their leaves and streams run at different levels. My confidence in my ability to effectively lead along the trail waned with every passing score of yards, until we reached a point - deep in the woods - where I no longer recognized the trail, and no longer knew precisely where we were.

It is a humbling thing to find yourself in the middle of the woods, woods which should seem familiar to you but are not and knowing that there is a group of your peers behind you expecting you to lead them. It requires a person to give up the sense of leadership and open themselves to a willingness to follow.

There is an anecdote of a high school senior applying to a prestigious school. Looking at the application, one of the few questions to be answered was, "Are you a leader?" The student's heart sank, they knew that had never been their forte in high school. Despondent, but honest, they simply wrote the answer, "no," and submitted the application without any real hope. Weeks later the reply came, "Dear Applicant: A study of the applications for enrollment this year reveals that we will have 1,452 new leaders. We are pleased to accept you because it is imperative that there is at least one person who can help them understand the importance of following, as well."

In our lives of faith, as disciples of Christ and believers of God and God's Kingdom, we will often be asked, called even to difficult and challenging things as we proclaim God's

good news, and the first of these, perhaps the foremost of these, is to let go of our own notion of being able to do any of it on our own, or by our own strength alone. And in our Scripture readings this morning we have upwards of four examples of this foundational reality to our calling as disciples.

First, Abraham, or as we're initially introduced to him, Abram. Abram has spent his entire life in the land of Haran, which would be the modern-day Syria. His whole life, and his family and wife's family before them. And then, at seventy-five - the age when most of us have been retired and pretty well settled for several years - at seventy-five God comes and speaks to Abram saying, simply and directly, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."

I might dare say that any of us, receiving such a command, would have words to say in response. But as I said, the call to discipleship is a call which will, first and foremost, demand that we suspend our own sense of self, our own sense of capability, and surrender to the One who calls us, the One who will lead us. Abram becomes one of the first examples of this, not just this morning but in the full story of God's presence in our world, in our lives. But he is only the first, and there are three others I want to mention this morning; we'll return to Abram later.

Jumping to Matthew's gospel, we find Jesus and the disciples traveling through the region surrounding his home city of Nazareth. As he journeys, he comes across Matthew, a tax-collector. Nazareth was a tenuous mix of Jewish and non-Jewish residents, and there was a strong Roman presence in the area. As such, the tax-collectors tended to be a bit more brazen in doing more than what was required in order to line their own pockets. As such, because of his profession and his actions, Matthew was not held in very high regard by the Jewish residents of the region.

And yet, Matthew is the one whom Jesus calls and invites to come along. Matthew then joins Jesus and the other disciples as they eat with other socially-proclaimed sinners, prompting the religious leadership of the day to question Jesus and his motives. And Jesus' response here is very telling in terms of what it is to follow: "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."

Those who are righteous, who believe themselves right and justified for the sake of their own actions, are unable to set themselves aside long enough to hear and receive not only what God is offering, but to follow where God is leading. In order to follow in faith the One who does indeed call out to us and invite us, we must learn to set aside any inflated sense of self which would inhibit us from responding in faith. And to help us see this, we are then introduced to two other nameless characters who embody Jesus' declaration of desiring mercy over all.

First is another religious leader, one who is used to setting the terms and the course of action, who is accustomed to being followed. His whole life, profession, and calling in service to God have supported this dynamic. But now his whole life has been turned

upside down, and in ways over which he has no control, no influence, and no ability to do anything through his own power. His daughter has died, and there is nothing he is able to do. I imagine, only too well, the state of his emotions and thoughts, the depth of his grief. But he has heard that Jesus is in the vicinity, eating with tax-collectors and sinners, yes, but nearby, and he has also heard the stories of previous healings and miracles.

So he does what we are expected to do, what we are called to do as we are invited to follow in discipleship: he sets aside his station and role, he sets aside his status and any concept of being able to do this on his own, and he goes to Jesus for aid. For comfort. For a miracle. And what does Jesus do? He responds with mercy, and gets up to go with the distraught leader. Jesus could have demanded sacrifice. He could have said, 'well, people die, and you've spent a good deal of time undermining me.' Jesus could have done those things; instead, he arose and went to enact mercy.

Along the way we meet our fourth person, our fourth example for us today. Like the religious leader, we have yet another person who is in need of healing and wholeness, and who has been unable to achieve this of her own capability or efforts. She has been afflicted with a state of bleeding for twelve years, which means that not only has she had a medical condition, but socially she has been deemed unclean and unapproachable for twelve years. Again, she does the only thing left to her: she suspends her own sense of self or capability, and places her trust, her hope, and her very being into the hands of Jesus. Again, Jesus could have chastised, calling her unclean, telling her he was busy and this was a bad time, he was on his way to raise the dead.

Instead, Jesus paused, acknowledging and seeing her, and proclaims that, in faith, she is made well. From there he continues to the house of the religious leader and, taking the dead girl by the hand, awakens her to life. Mercy, not sacrifice; trust, not pride; following in faith, not leading by one's own capability.

This is perhaps the hardest thing to do in the life of faith, which is why it is one of the first, foundational things we must practice. And not just once, but every day.

Two commentators on these passages offer the following in conversation. "But those of us like the synagogue leader and the woman who was bleeding, we know where our limits are and know that we have to look outside of ourselves to the God who is greater. We live by faith in Christ's strength, not by our own strength" (Chesley Harmon). Likewise, "Yahweh required Abram to give up the security of his social sanctuary and familiar support...in order to depend on Yahweh alone while following this directive" (Meg Jenista). (*Center for Excellence in Preaching*).

Or as one church member recently reflected when talking about a hardship they had come through, "I had to give up my own sense of being able to do it all on my own. You think you're standing on your own capabilities until you find out you're in free fall."

Following in faith does not mean blind obedience, going along like a lemming approaching a cliff. To follow, in faith, invites us to suspend our own beliefs in our own power or capability, and trust the One who is able to lead us in ways and to places beyond our comprehension or ability to realize on our own.

On that fall afternoon at Duffield, I was able to eventually lead our little group out of the woods and back to the lodge; it turns out we had never been far from the path at all, but I had to let go of what I expected to see in order to see the path God had for us. What happens when we suspend our own self-belief and place our trust, our hope, in the One who can lead? The sick are made whole, the dead come to life, and God's future unfolds before us. But we have to give up. We have to let go of our own sense of self-fulfillment or capability to reach our hoped-for goals on our own power alone. And that is a profoundly difficult step to take. It asks much of us. But that is the invitation, the calling before us, and I can guarantee, we will find great joy on the other side of it. Amen.

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