

***“Who Is This Man? Jesus in the Gospel of Mark—Strange Company (the Disciples)”***

This series of message is about us seeing clearly who Jesus really was through the Gospel of Mark. The Gospel of Mark is the oldest existing book about Jesus. It was written somewhere around 65AD. And just like Mark, we're asking and answering two questions: **Who is this man Jesus? And how does his life affect our lives?**

Last week we looked at Jesus' baptism. That's when he knows who he really is and what his mission is—to heal the sick, to teach about God's good news, and to die on the cross for the sins of all human beings. Right after his baptism he is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days of preparation for what he's about to do.

Jesus comes out of that time in the wilderness ready, focused, powerful, unstoppable. But he knows he can't do it alone. So after his baptism and after those 40 days in the wilderness he heads back to his home territory of Galilee where he grew up. And this is where he begins to call his disciples, his staff, his band of brothers to help him carry out his mission. Here's what that looked like. **“As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.’ At once they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him” (Mark 1:16-20, TNIV).**

He'll call more later on, but that paints an interesting picture. Today we're going to look at the disciples and the call Jesus placed on their lives.

Let's start by looking at who Jesus invited, or called, to be his disciples. When you read the stories about who Jesus called, it's interesting to see what Jesus is up to. What he's doing is that he's reaching for help. The disciples are going to be assisting him on the immediate mission. But it's bigger than that. Jesus is calling them because he knows that there's going to be a day when he'll be arrested, crucified, and ascend to heaven and these disciples are going to have the job of carrying on his mission after he's gone.

And get this, if these men fail, everything that Jesus did on the cross, everything he worked for, everything he taught would be gone, because the mission is in their hands. There is no plan B. If they fail, Jesus' mission fails. Jesus is putting all his eggs in one basket. He's counting on these disciples to carry on without him. There's a lot at stake.

So knowing that Jesus' whole mission depends on these followers, who do you think he might recruit for this special ops team? Where would he go to find people for this A team and what do think would be his criteria for choosing them?

I tell you what I would do if it was me. If it was me, I would get the word out that I was looking for the best candidates for this position. They would need to be people with great credentials, a great education. They would need to be people with great leadership skills, great communication skills, the ability to work as a team, great character, great faith.

That's what I'm going to be looking for if I'm looking for disciples. And do you know where I'm going to go to look for them? I'm going to go to the best schools and seminaries there in Jerusalem. I'm going to ask the leaders of the seminaries who they think the top graduates are this year. I'd say, “Tell me about their work; tell me about their character; tell me what made them stand out; tell me how they stood out from their peers; tell me about their dedication; tell me about their grades; tell me about the real life experiences they've had and how those were fruitful.”

That's what I'd be doing. But Jesus, Jesus didn't do any of those things. None of them! Jesus goes to the town of Bethsaida, a little fishing town looking for disciples. There's no famous school there, no big name university, no fancy technical college, nothing. It's a fishing village. The name Bethsaida means, “House of Fish.” No kidding! You've heard of IHOP. This place is the IHOF. It's not known for high caliber disciples. It's not known for producing spiritual giants! It's the house of fish!

Jesus sees two fishermen, Simon and his brother Andrew. Now it's almost for sure that these men had met Jesus before. John tells us that they had all met prior to Jesus calling them. So this is not a random thing. Jesus knows who he's looking for. There is Simon and Andrew and he calls them to come and follow him. No

interviews, no job descriptions. Do you know what their qualifications were for this job? None! Never been disciples before. Little if any formal education.

They were fisherman—their hands were callused, their hair was wild, they smelled like fish, they talked like fishermen. Not the kind of people you are I would pick to be on the A team, to carry out the biggest mission in the world. Acts 4:13 tells us they were unschooled. They probably could not read or write. It's likely they had only heard the Bible read, but probably never read it for themselves.

When Jesus calls them, they have to be sensing that this is something they just can't miss out on. They realize at some level that they've been invited to do something extraordinary. So Jesus is looking for Simon and Andrew and when he asked them to join the team, they dropped their nets and joined him.

There was another group down the shore away--the Zebedee boys and their dad. Also fishermen. Zebedee had some hired hands working in his fishing outfit along with his two sons James and John. When Jesus asks them to come and follow him, they drop their nets and go. Simon and Andrew, James and John, knew that they had been chosen for something extraordinary. They give up their jobs, their livelihood and follow Jesus.

They go a little further down the road to the town of Capernaum. It was about a three mile walk—not much by their standards. They arrive there and encounter a man that Simon and Andrew, James and John all knew. They all knew this guy and none of them would have liked him. His name was Levi and he was a tax collector.

In the first century people like Levi would have bought this position. It was a job that was given to the highest bidder. The Romans controlled that area and this is how they collected taxes. If you bid for the job of tax collector for a region and got the job you paid the taxes for your region up front and then you got your money back by collecting taxes from the people who lived in your region. And Rome didn't really care how you did it, or how much you got, as long as they had their money up front. Tax collectors could take as much as they wanted from the people in the region, and if anybody balked at what the tax collector was taking, the Roman Army stepped in and fixed it. So tax collectors got rich. Yes they paid a huge sum up front, but then they made 10 or 100 times that later.

The Jewish people hated, despised, paying taxes to Rome who was oppressing them. And they saw tax collectors as traitors. The taxes paid to Rome didn't provide anything for them, no schools, no hospitals, maybe some roads, but nothing beyond that. What you really got for you taxes was the presence of Roman soldiers who beat you, and treated you like dirt, and crucified you if you stepped out of line. So you got nothing for your taxes but hardship and heartbreak.

Tax collectors were not only considered traitors, they were religiously unclean because they associated with the Romans. In the Bible the word tax collector is almost always spoken with the word sinner, and often with the two words sinners and prostitutes. They were all the same class of people in the first century.

Jesus comes along and sees Levi sitting at his tax station, his toll booth, a booth at the corner of a couple busy roads so he could see the people, call them in and extract taxes. Now who did he extract taxes from? From fisherman. He had extracted taxes from Simon and Andrew, and James and John. Can you feel the love that these men would have had for Levi? I image them being so excited when Jesus went up to Levi's tax booth and said, "Levi, come follow me." I'm sure the other guys were like, "Cool, Levi's on the team too! How awesome! We're going to have so much fun! We have so much to talk about!" Uh, nope.

It was scandalous that Jesus would ask Levi to follow him. It had to have been a real buzz-kill for Simon, Andrew, James and John. They're like, "Jesus, what are you doing?! Do you know who he is? We're not going to be your disciples if he's going to be one."

I've got to point this out. That when Jesus calls us to be his followers, you don't get to pick who the other followers are going to be. It's kind of like your family. You don't get to pick them. That means that there are probably people sitting around you right now that, prior to coming to Saint Paul's, you didn't like very much. There are neighbors who've hurt your feelings; there are people who did you dirty in business. Guess what—we're all still disciples of Jesus. They may have done something mean to you before they were followers of Jesus. Or after but didn't think it was mean. I don't know, but what I do know is that you don't get to pick. And Levi had taken money from Simon, Andrew, James and John on many occasions and I have no doubt that

those guys didn't want anything to do with him. Jesus is saying, "That's not how it works in God's Kingdom. You all are my disciples."

Now, here at Saint Paul's, if you don't get along with somebody you have the luxury of 5 different worship services and lots of different small groups so you can probably avoid them. But our hope is that somewhere along the way you are able to overcome the differences, the hurt, because the mission is bigger than that. Jesus message was clearly a message of forgiveness and reconciliation—especially for those who had been your enemies in the past. That's a very hard thing to do.

The picture we need to see here is that these people that Jesus is calling, they are the least likely to succeed. They are not the A team. They're not even likely to get along. Jesus chose the most unlikely candidates, and he saw in them something they couldn't even see in themselves.

Listen very carefully. All of you have been called by Jesus to be his disciples. Some of you are sitting on the fence trying to decide, "Do I really want to be a disciple or not?" Some of you have already decided to follow. And do you know why he chose you? Not because of fame, or fortune, or abilities, or education, or your resume. In fact, he chose you because you're misfits. Every one of you. He chose you.

In fact, those are who he prefers. If you think you got it all figured out; if you think you're really something, he's going to have a hard time using you. That's just how it works. That's why Jesus couldn't ever connect with the Pharisees. They thought they were really something. They had their credentials, their degrees, their positions. And because of all that they couldn't even hear the call. The people who heard the call were the ones who were saying, "You know, I'm not worthy. He couldn't possibly use me."

Jesus' disciples are terrified when he sends them out on a little mission on their own. Some of you have told me that it's scary to think about teaching Sunday School, or it's scary to think about going on a mission trip, or scary to think about sharing your faith in your work place. Of course it's scary! You say, "I don't think I can do it." No you can't! Not without the power of the Holy Spirit working through you. But that's exactly the kind of people Jesus looks for. People like you who recognize that you're broken, you're misfits, you're not really qualified. But he qualifies you.

In the Gospel of Mark, Mark paints the picture of the disciples as very, very human. In Mark's Gospel the disciples are dense. They don't get it. They argue about who is going to be greatest when Jesus takes over. One minute Simon says that he'll never betray Jesus, the next he denies knowing him three times. Jesus gets so frustrated with them. He knows all of this in advance and he still chooses them.

Listen carefully, Jesus has called you to be his disciples not because you're really something; not because you're so important; not because you are so attractive, or gifted, or smart. He called you because you're broken and the people who respond to his call are those who get to a point where they say, "The single most important thing in my life, is to answer this call. And I'm going to follow him." You recognize your limitations and you say, "God, take what little bit I have to offer and do with it whatever you want."

He accepts you right there, knowing you're going to mess up in the future. Knowing that there times when you are going to fail and fall short, and he still is going to use you, and he still called you despite that.

The last thing I want you to remember about the disciples is how he changed their names—at least 4 of them, maybe more. Simon's name meant a reed, a kind of tall grass that grew along the bank of the Sea of Galilee. This grass that bent whichever way the wind blew. That's what his father named him after—bendy grass. Jesus looked at him and said, "Simon, I'm going to give you a new name. You dad called you grass, I'm going to call you Peter, which means Rock, because I see what you can be, not what you are."

James and John, the ones who were arguing about who would be greatest in God's Kingdom. Jesus says, "I'm going to call you Boanerges. Which means the sons of thunder." He doesn't say why, but maybe because even though they had those times of being petty and arguing about who would be greater in God's kingdom, that Jesus could see how later their witness for him would roar into the world like a storm. How they would be bold and courageous for Jesus after his death. James would be beheaded for his faith. John was tortured with boiling oil, exiled to die alone on an the island of Patmos.

And Levi, who was the unclean disciple, the despised tax collector that nobody wanted to be around. Do you know what Jesus called him? Matthew. Do you know what Matthew means, it means “gift of God.”

Jesus looks at you, just like he looked at his disciples, and he sees what can be, not necessarily what you are. He knows you’re going to blow it at times, but he’s still willing to call you and he has a great mission for you.

To be a disciple, what does that really mean? It means to be a learner, a student. A disciple of Jesus says, “I want to see the world as Jesus sees it. I want to think like he thinks.”

And being a disciple means following him. That means doing the things that Jesus did. That’s going into the world every day and saying, “I’m on a mission every day. How can I be a servant today wherever I find myself?”

The last thing that disciples do is go fishing for people. Jesus called the disciples to be fishers of people. If this journey of following Jesus is the life that really is life, then shouldn’t we share that with other people? If following Jesus brings a deeper quality, a better quality to my life, shouldn’t I want to share that good news with somebody else?

Jesus is calling you and me to do the same things he called Simon, Andrew, James, John, Levi and the others.

All this makes me think of Craig and Kim Bonet. They’re pretty new to Saint Paul’s and when we started the new epic worship service they stepped up at the very beginning to help. They started on the First Impressions Team welcoming folks. Then they volunteered to help lead a team of volunteers to set up all the chairs for epic every Saturday morning. Every week they do that. And every week they help with hospitality. And I tell them how much they are doing for God’s kingdom in that work. And not only that but they are sharing the good news. They are getting the word out. In fact I’ve witnessed one of the most amazing things. They have invited probably 30 people to epic and they’ve come, I’m not sure what they have over these people, but they come. And not only are those people coming and connecting, but they’re inviting their friends, who have in turn invited their friends. That’s like three generations of people inviting people. How awesome is that! They’re not the only ones doing that, but I’m so proud of them.

They’ve discovered the joy of discipleship and when I see what they’re doing, it moves me. A group of us had dinner together a couple weeks ago and the Bonet’s shared the stories they’d heard from people whose lives are changing because they invited them to connect and they have and things are happening. I’m so proud of them not only for what they do here, but how they let the light of Christ shine at work, and in their neighborhood. I get so much joy out of seeing God use them, and you, in ways like that. In serving Jesus, there’s a joy that blesses us and transforms us.

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is about having your eyes open and your ears open, looking for opportunities to use your influence, looking for ways to use the abilities that God has given you, to invite people to come along for a great adventure. It’s about ministering to people in tangible ways. It’s like Mother Teresa said, “Small things, done with great love will change the world.”

That’s Jesus call to you. And I realize some of you are on the fence and saying, “Gosh I don’t know. Maybe I don’t want to serve Jesus. I don’t know if I want to follow him. I don’t know how hard that will be.” But listen. You’re going to serve somebody—Just like Bob Dylan said. You’re going to devote yourself to the master of something. You’re going to invite people to follow you somewhere. I’ve got to tell you, that this invitation to follow Jesus is one you don’t want to turn down because you’ll be missing out on the very best part of life if you’re not following him.

Simon, Andrew, James and John said yes, I hope you do to. It’s the life that really is life. And for today, that’s the good news. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection for his resources in this message.*