

“Humility and Grace as Elements of Calling”
Isaiah 6:1–13; 1 Corinthians 15:1–11; Luke 5:1–11
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February 6, 2022

In every setting where I have served, I have had a certain conversation, often more than once, in which a person has expressed feelings of unworthiness for a leadership role, often the role of deacon. While there may have been some rare occasions when I was tempted to agree with the person, the majority of the time, I have said the person’s reticence was a sign for me that he/she was exactly the kind of person who should be in that role. Especially in regard to being a deacon or minister, it is the person who feels completely worthy who is suspect. Humility is a good thing in the church.

All three texts today support this claim. Each is a narrative of calling, and in all of the stories, the persons being called feel unworthy.

In the year that King Uzziah dies, after reigning over Judah for roughly half a century, Isaiah has a vision in which he encounters a Holy God. In a time of great uncertainty, not unlike ours, he has a powerful personal experience that assures him that the world is in good hands, no matter who sits on Judah’s throne, and he will be called to serve the God who holds the world. “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” God asks, and Isaiah says, “Here am I; send me!”

He accepts the call, but his first response to this holy encounter is to say, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” Isaiah doesn’t feel worthy to be in God’s presence, much less serve as a prophet. Simply being confronted with the holiness of God reminds him that he is not holy.

In the reading from 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul is making a passionate appeal for belief in Jesus’ resurrection, and he begins by reminding his readers that he is an apostle, not just a follower of Jesus’ teachings, but someone who has seen him personally. But he goes on to say that he is the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle,

because he has persecuted the church. He is called to follow Jesus and share the Gospel with the Gentiles, and he ultimately embraces this calling, but he feels unworthy.

And to be clear, this is not false self-deprecation. Paul has been persecuting Christians, even to the point of death, when the Spirit of the Risen Christ appears to him on the Damascus Road. He is someone I may have been tempted to agree with when he said he felt unworthy! Yet his apparent weakness would become a strength.

In the reading from Luke, Simon Peter has been fishing with some other fisherman but catching nothing when Jesus, whom they apparently don't know, at least not well, tells them to cast their nets into deeper water. "If you say so," Peter says, with incredulity, seemingly just to humor the stranger who presumes to tell a professional how to do his job. But the nets fill with a massive catch, and realizing that something miraculous has happened, that Jesus must be some kind of holy person, Peter says, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

Like Isaiah, Peter's immediate response to encountering the holy is to acknowledge that he is not holy. Like Isaiah, he feels unworthy to be in the presence of the holy, much less be called to service. But Jesus calls him, along with other fishermen, including James and John, to follow him in casting nets into the even deeper water of the world in catching women and men.

In all of these stories, the persons being called feel unworthy. Humility defines their response to God's presence and calling. The message for us seems clear. In relationship to any call to service — as ministers, deacons or any role in the body of Christ, any work we are called to in the world, humility is a virtue.

Now we are talking about genuine humility, not pious pretense. There is an old story about a rabbi who was moved to awe in worship and thus fell to his knees before the bema and cried out, "O God, before you, I am nothing, I am nothing!" Noticing the rabbi's piety and not to be outdone, the president of the synagogue fell to his knees before the bema and cried out, "O God, before you, I am nothing, I am nothing!" Finally, an ordinary member of the congregation from the very back of the synagogue came forward, kneeled before the bema and cried out, "O

God, before you, I am nothing, I am nothing!” at which point the president lifted his head, looked at the rabbi and said, “Look at who thinks he is nothing!” This is not what we are talking about.

Nor are we talking about denying the value of our lives. We are each made in the image of God. We are all beloved and gifted for service. We are simply saying that when we realize we are in the presence of pure holiness, we know we are not holy. And when we are called to participate in God’s realm, we are overwhelmed at the privilege and responsibility.

When we are with a friend at a time of profound loss or great joy, the death of a loved one or the birth of child; when we simply show up to be with someone but suddenly realize they are seeing a part of God through us; when we have the privilege of being an instrument of grace, sharing clothing or food; we are on holy ground, we are awed, and if we have any self-awareness at all, we wonder — why am I here, do I really belong? This applies to ministers and deacons, but it also applies to every other member of the body of Christ, because in our tradition, we are all priests to and for one another. From time to time, we all stand on this kind of holy ground, and when we do, we are humbled.

But while the persons being called in the texts we have read all feel a profound sense of humility, they also all experience an equal measure of grace. When Isaiah confesses his weakness and sin, one of the seraphs takes a hot coal from the altar, presses it to his lips and declares that his guilt has been taken away. It is not an easy process, but he is forgiven and cleansed and thus prepared to receive his calling. Though Paul says he is unfit to be an apostle, God chooses him anyway, forgives his very real transgressions and uses his weakness as a strength. His past life as a persecutor of Christians makes his faith more compelling, and when he talks of unlimited mercy, the concept means something. When Peter confesses his sin and asks Jesus to go away, Jesus says, “Do not be afraid. From now on, you will be catching people.” In all of these stories, the persons feeling unworthy experience grace.

But notice that grace in all of these texts is not simply forgiveness of sin — though this is involved — it is also empowerment for service.

Grace is a something not of our doing, it is pure gift; it is forgiveness, but it is also strength. Grace changes Isaiah, Paul, Peter and the other fishermen so that they can participate in the work of God's realm. Grace enables us to confront our frailty and sin, find the help we need, and in the context of this help, become better people. It is not a pain-free process, but it is a redemptive one well worth any discomfort involved.

Commenting on our reading from Luke in an old issue of *The Christian Century*, Kyle Childress says that God is not for those content to paddle around in the shallow end. Jesus calls us into the deep where we come face to face with who God is and who we are not. A rancher in his church put it this way, "I'd rather be whipped with a wet rope than have to face up to my own sin every Sunday." Wouldn't we all?! But despite our initial resistance, deep down don't we want to face up to who we are and who we could be? Don't we want to become more?

Childress goes on to describe a civil rights attorney who said he was afraid of the preacher and his church. When asked why, the attorney replied, "Because they remind me of God." Then, Childress continues, saying, "About 3 or 4 years later (the attorney) promised his dying father he would return to church, and he hadn't missed a Sunday since, sitting with his wife on the second row. One day, while eating lunch with some colleagues, he said something uncommonly gentle to an overworked waitress. One of the attorneys remarked, 'What's gotten into you?' He said, 'I'm a Christian now.'"

That's how grace works. It changes us for the better. That's how God works. God offers forgiveness and empowerment for our every flaw and weakness, and this too humbles us, but it also frees us to be the people God sees that we are really are — people capable of uncommon gentleness, people capable of speaking with a prophetic voice, people who can follow Jesus into the deep waters of life and love and service. We may not feel worthy of all of this, but the God who knows us better than we know ourselves sees what is possible deep within us, and then extends grace to help us reach further toward our potential.