

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C – February 9, 2025

“Abundant Grace—Costly vs. Cheap”

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Isaiah 6:1-8, (9-13) | Psalm 138 | 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 | Luke 5:1-11

We’ve spent a lot of time thinking about what it means to be a disciple since I came to Vermont. Let’s look back at some of the recent lessons and then see where today’s gospel lands.

In the oldest gospel, written by Mark and his followers, Jesus told Simon and his brother Andrew, “I will make you fish for people,” and they immediately followed him. No questions asked. A little later, Jesus called all twelve disciples, sent them out two-by-two and gave them their marching orders: to spread the good news and heal people’s minds, bodies, and spirits.

Again in Mark, Jesus told the disciples that they would be going up to Jerusalem, where the Son of Man, whom they knew was Jesus, would be condemned to death by religious leaders. He would be handed over to the Gentiles, who would mock him, spit upon him, flog him, and kill him, and after three days he will rise again. Two of the disciples, James and John, decided that they were prepared to accompany him. The brothers asked to be seated on either side of Jesus in heaven. Jesus wasn’t sure they understood that they were volunteering for. I assumed they were being selfish and clueless, because earlier Jesus had caught the disciples arguing about which one of them was greatest, but it’s hard to know for sure. What is certain is that Jesus could not grant their request. Only God could.

In Mark again, Jesus confronted the spiritual blindness of his disciples, who seemed to be unable or unwilling to accept Jesus’ teaching— that the Son of Man must experience great suffering, be rejected by religious leaders, and killed, and after three days he would rise again. They struggled to understand this teaching, but they accepted it. There is a recurring pattern of obedience, of following Jesus even after the disciples had failed and given up. When they tried again, Jesus worked through them. Like Moses, Isaiah (in today’s Old Testament reading), and Jeremiah, Simon Peter was reluctant, but obeyed. Simon was not called to “catch people” because he is good at it, but because if he says yes to Jesus’ call and invitation, Jesus will work through him.

Moving to the Gospel according to John, we heard that Jesus turned water into wine. He didn't make just enough. He filled many jars, to illustrate God's abundant grace. And in today's gospel from Luke, Jesus showed them God's abundance in a new way. The disciples were discouraged, ready to quit for the night. Jesus asked them to let the nets out one last time. They hauled in so many fish, that they were afraid, because their nets began to break and their boats were about to sink.

The disciples weren't exceptionally brave, enlightened, or noble. They could be selfish and full of pride. At other times, they were afraid and struggled. Simon Peter's reaction to Jesus filling the boat with fish in Luke's gospel was to fall down at Jesus' knee, and say, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Simon asked Jesus to forgive him. Why did Simon Peter confess his sin to Jesus at that moment of abundant grace? Why didn't he just fall to his knees and give thanks? He did not feel worthy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that, "The disciples are called not because of their own merits but because of Jesus Christ's authority." Even when the disciples sinned, Jesus did not abandon or reject them.

God's grace flowed through Jesus into the disciples as abundantly as the wine in the wedding story. Grace flowed from Jesus through the disciples into the world in the form of service. They were able to heal bodies, minds, and spirits. Because they obeyed, Jesus gave them the authority to heal the world.

This theme of repentance or asking for forgiveness is a favorite one in Luke, and it's a good reminder to us that the Lenten season of self-examination and repentance is fast approaching. Lent is time for us to return, to re-engage as disciples. These forty days prepare us to die to our old life and be reborn into new life.

As I wrestled with what it means to be a disciple in this world again for today, I decided to revisit Bonhoeffer's writings on grace. His theology was shaped by his experience in Nazi Germany. The Church had become so closely aligned to the state, it lost sight of its true mission, which was to proclaim the gospel and make disciples. Bonhoeffer believed that true grace does not come without any effort or sacrifice on the part of the believer. True grace comes with a cost.

To Bonhoeffer, "Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy for which the merchant

will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.”

That is discipleship as it’s described in the Bible. We are wrestling with this term “costly.” We are used to thinking about grace as a gift from God that is given to all people, regardless of their worthiness. How do we reconcile the belief in God’s abundant gift of grace and love with the idea of cheap grace, in which we take communion even when we are not sorry for the wrongs we have done, or when we relax in our privileged lives and neglect the poor. Costly grace requires us to hold ourselves accountable for our thoughts, words and deed, things done and left undone. Bonhoeffer believed that church should be actively involved in working to bring about social and political change, writing: “The world exercises dominion by force and Christ and Christians conquer by service.”

As disciples, we should take time to reflect on the ways in which we are clinging to the world and put ourselves the center of our lives. Are we open to hearing God’s call or are our lives too busy to listen? Are we more comfortable keeping things the way they are, even if that inaction harms us and others? Are we thinking about ourselves and ignoring people who are hungry, naked, sick, or imprisoned?

As a Christian leader, how can I fail to examine myself and remove the barriers that keep God from working through me? How can I not ask forgiveness for the times I put myself in the front seat and put God in the back, and take credit for what God has done through me. How can I not ask forgiveness for the times I let myself get overtired and lose patience? Yes, our God is a God of abundant love and mercy, and I take comfort in that, but I also hold myself accountable and must keep turning back (“re-turning”) to God.

If we focus on grace alone and ignore the ways in which we separate ourselves from God, we will find that we have placed ourselves at the center of our faith, in God’s place.

These days, especially, when it’s easy to accuse and judge others, we should make sure we turn ourselves toward God first. By being open and obedient (and remember that the word obedient is from the Latin word **to listen**), God will work through us. And remember that we don’t get to judge who is worthy. God is the judge. We are called and invited to love.