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## Lessons in Luke: Calling First Disciples

Luke 5:1-11, 27-32

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I've had allergies since I was a little kid. I'm allergic to grass, ragweed, birch trees, cats, just to name a few. But my most severe allergy? Failure. Sneezing, a runny nose and itchy eyes? I can manage those symptoms with a pill. But failure? There's no pill to ease my reaction to failure. Failure feels fatal.

When I was a freshman in college, I auditioned for the Tucson Symphony. I was a good musician in high school. I even played first chair in the All-State Band. But I didn't make the symphony. And the reason I was given? I just wasn't good enough. I wore those words like an anchor around my neck for months. It didn't just tap into my fear that I wasn't a good enough musician. It threw gas on the fire of my fear that I, as a human being, just don't measure up.

And I've learned over the years that I'm not the only one who struggles with an allergy to failure, with a fear that we don't measure up, that we're not good enough. In fact, it is remarkably common. We all have a voice inside our head that tries to convince us that we are less than we should be or could be. And unfortunately, sometimes that leaks into our faith life. We imagine God looking down on us, shaking a holy head and mumbling, "Doesn't measure up. Not good enough." In fact, there's a theology that says that God had to send his Son to die because we aren't good enough. That's a theology I used to believe. But not anymore.

Today's scripture is for all of us who are allergic to failure, who sometimes worry that we're not good enough. It's Good News for the self-esteem challenged among us! Let me read it for us, and then dig in to understand what the Gospel writer Luke is saying to us.

*One day as Jesus was preaching on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, great crowds pressed in on him to listen to the word of God. He noticed two empty boats at the water's edge, for the fishermen had left them and were*

*washing their nets. Stepping into one of the boats, Jesus asked Simon, its owner, to push it out into the water. So, he sat in the boat and taught the crowds from there.*

*When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Now go out where it is deeper, and let down your nets to catch some fish."*

*"Master," Simon replied, "we worked hard all last night and didn't catch a thing. But if you say so, I'll let the nets down again." And this time their nets were so full of fish they began to tear! A shout for help brought their partners in the other boat, and soon both boats were filled with fish and on the verge of sinking.*

*When Simon Peter realized what had happened, he fell to his knees before Jesus and said, "Oh, Lord, please leave me—I'm such a sinful man." For he was awestruck by the number of fish they had caught, as were the others with him. His partners, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were also amazed.*

*Jesus replied to Simon, "Don't be afraid! From now on you'll be fishing for people!" And as soon as they landed, they left everything and followed Jesus.*

*Later, as Jesus left the town, he saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at his tax collector's booth. "Follow me and be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Levi got up, left everything, and followed him.*

*Later, Levi held a banquet in his home with Jesus as the guest of honor. Many of Levi's fellow tax collectors and other guests also ate with them. But the Pharisees and their teachers of religious law complained bitterly to Jesus' disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with such scum?"*

*Jesus answered them, "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners and need to repent."*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

While it's obvious that this story is about Jesus calling his disciples, it's not so obvious what Luke is really trying to tell us. To grasp Luke's point, we need to understand some things about first century Judaism. So, buckle up and let's enjoy a little history lesson. This story takes place in a region called The Galilee, where Jewish tradition ran deep. Rabbis were at the top of the social ladder. They were the cultural

elites; highly educated, deeply respected, and socially powerful. Rabbis were teachers, and in the first century Rabbis only recruited the brightest and the best to be their students. Every parent's dream was to have their little boy apprenticed to a prominent Rabbi. It was the first century equivalent of getting into Harvard Medical School. And when a Rabbi found the brightest and the best he would say, "Come, follow me."

But did you notice who Rabbi Jesus called? Not the brightest and the best. He called fishermen, people with little education or social status. These are the ones that other Rabbis had passed up because they weren't good enough. They didn't measure up. In fact, about the only people lower than fishermen in first century Jewish society were tax collectors. Not because they weren't bright or affluent, but because they were traitors. Levi was a Jew who worked for the Roman government, making his living by taxing his fellow countrymen. The Romans would have disdained him and the Jews would have considered him a failure. But it was to Simon, a fisherman, and Levi, a tax collector, that Jesus said, "Come, follow me."

Friends, do you now understand what Luke is trying to tell us through this passage? In this world it's the brightest and the best who get chosen. It's always been that way. But not in the world that God is unveiling in Jesus. The best and the brightest are welcome, sure, but the Kingdom of God is a place where all are wanted, welcomed and loved. We are all enough. The head of the class and those who dropped out. Those who think they have it all together and those who can't even find a bag to put it in. Those who pray daily and those who believe they don't have a prayer. Those who tow the line and those who are at the end of their rope.

That's the great truth that Luke wants us to hear today, but it's so hard for some of us to accept. We tend to be like Simon who cries out, "Oh, Lord, please leave me. I'm such a sinful person." Simon doesn't think he measures up. He doesn't think he's good enough. Do you feel like that sometimes? Maybe all the time? Does your past leave you feeling like you don't have a future? Have your failures convince you that you are a failure? Do your feelings of inadequacy cause you to wonder if God could ever love you, want you, or use you in God's work in the world? Me too!

That's why today's Gospel reading is such great news. Jesus is not a means for us to ascend to God. Jesus is God's commitment to come to us, right where we

are, to love us just as we are, and to invite us to walk with God in simple faith. There's no "if" at the end of "Come, follow me." He doesn't say, "Come, follow me if you know enough of the Bible and have the right theology" or "Come, follow me if you're failure free or if your past is perfect." It's an open invitation of love and grace to walk every day in the knowledge that you are enough. God chooses you, just as he chose Simon and Levi.

And isn't that what we all long for? So that, even when we don't measure up to the world's standards, even when we aren't good enough to play in the symphony...while it may still hurt, we can turn our minds and surrender our wounded hearts to the One who says, "You are loved. You are enough. Come, follow me."

So, let's follow. We always have the choice, just as Simon and Levi did. And just as Jesus walked alongside them, the Holy Spirit walks with us every step of the way, encouraging us and leading us when we aren't sure which way to turn. And if we'll follow Jesus, our journey will be just like Simon's. We'll fall and we'll fail and doubt and we'll forget that following Jesus isn't a ladder to climb but a pathway of grace. And like Simon Peter we'll be forgiven and set back on our feet to continue on the journey. And at no time, ever, will God's love for you change.

So, let's declare these truths like we believe them... because they're true.

Leader: The world says, "You're not enough."

**All: But God says, "You are the apple of my eye."**

Leader: The world says, "Climb higher."

**All: But Jesus says, "I'll come to you."**

Leader: The world says, "Your failures and flaws are fatal."

**All: But God says, "I make beauty out of ashes."**

Leader: The world says, "You don't measure up."

**All: But God says, "My immeasurable love is what defines you."**

Leader: Jesus says, "Come, follow me."

**All: We say, "Like Simon and Levi, we will follow You."**