

Third Sunday after the Epiphany; January 28, 2024  
+ Mark 1:14-20 +  
“You’re Perfect to Go”

**After John was put in prison, Jesus went to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God. “The time is fulfilled,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near! Repent and believe in the gospel.”**

**As Jesus was going along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casing a net into the sea, since they were fisherman. Jesus said to them, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. Going on a little farther, he saw James the Son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat mending the nets. Immediately Jesus called them. They left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.**

Have you ever been told to do something that you were unqualified for? At your job you are told to step in for someone who was sick that day. The only problem: your usual job is totally different than that job, and you have no idea what you’re doing. During the game the catcher gets hurt and the coach throws you behind the plate. The only problem: you’re an outfielder. Your wife tells you to encourage your daughter when she’s feeling insecure. The only problem: you’re not a girl, and still don’t really know how they think most of the time.

Being asked to do such things is intimidating. And it also makes you wonder about the person asking you to do it. If that person is asking you to do something you can’t do, maybe they should be doing something else themselves!

Jesus asks four men to do something they cannot do: leave their jobs, leave their homes, leave their families, leave their friends. **“Come!”** And that’s just the first thing they cannot do! Here’s another: **“Follow me.”** There is no way for them to know at his moment just what Jesus is asking: not only to follow him all around Israel for the next three years, but to stay with him through the crushing crowds of supporters, and the hateful venom of his enemies, all the way to the cross and empty tomb. But these men are far too selfish, weak, and cowardly to do that, as they will prove in their lower moments. And the impossible work doesn’t even stop there. Jesus also tells them to be **“fishers of men.”** And this is a task he will repeat to them on the mountaintop forty after his resurrection: go into all the world and gather disciples from everywhere. But these men are not orators. They are not debaters. They are not highly educated. They don’t have any of the qualifications they will need to convince strangers the world over to become followers of Christ!

What should we make of Jesus calling such men to do not one, not two, but three things – right in a row, with no break in between – that they cannot do?

Do you ever feel like Jesus is calling you to do something you’re not qualified for? We all have different callings from God. We are not called to be apostles like the four men Jesus called along the Sea of Galilee, or to follow Jesus for the three years of his ministry. Nor are we called to fan out into the whole world and publicly preach Jesus as missionaries. But we are called to be good citizens and neighbors (even to people who not neighborly to us). Those of us who get paychecks are called to be good workers, and those of who cut those checks to be fair bosses. Many of us are called to be faithful spouses or obedient children. And we are all called to follow Jesus in faith, and to let nothing come between us and him as we follow. And while you’re not called to fish for people as a preacher or missionary, you are called to speak of your

Savior to those around you as carry out your other callings. Do you ever feel overwhelmed by all the things Jesus is calling you to do in your life? Do you ever like you just can't do it all? Or that you're doing things you just can't do?

I don't know about you, but it's too much for me. And actually...I do know about you. It's too much for you, too. Because when I ask you people how you're doing I hear sighs, sometimes groans, sometimes words like, "Still here." "Hanging on." "Could be worse." Maybe that's not you, though. Maybe you're one of confident and cool ones who has it all under control, who says, "I've got a handle on everything God has called me to do. Good citizen? Check. Loving spouse and parent? Check. Hard worker? Check. I even talked to a friend once about Jesus! Plus, I come to church more often than not, so I'm following right behind Jesus. Yes, everything God has called me to I do and do well."

Maybe. But that's the thing, too. When God calls us, he doesn't call us to come along with him in faith well, to follow him in faith well, to fish for people well, or to do anything else he has called us to do well. "Well" is adequate for bosses and parents and teachers and coaches. "Well" is what they're after. God is after perfection. He calls us to come along with him in perfect faith, to follow him perfectly, to fish for people by proclaiming his love perfectly, and to do everything else he's called you to do perfectly.

So now you better know just how thoroughly unqualified you are. Because even if you do all things well, you never do them perfectly.

So then what should we make of this Jesus, who calls four disciples and all of us to do what we cannot do? What do we make of bosses or pastors or coaches who do this? If they tell us to do what we cannot, doesn't it make us wonder if they should be doing something else themselves?

Well, Jesus did do something else himself. Before he called these thoroughly inappropriate candidates to come, follow him, and fish for men, he made them perfect for it all. **After John was put in prison, Jesus went to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God. "The time is fulfilled," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near! Repent, and believe in the gospel."** After thousands of years or promises, prophecies, and predictions, the time was fulfilled. The divine King had come to open up the gates of the kingdom of heaven. Right there, in the flesh, in Galilee of Israel, the King of the Universe stood preaching the message that God's kingdom had already come into the hearts of all who believe.

With John the Baptist now in prison, Jesus knew the time was right for him to begin preaching and teaching the gospel publicly. But he did not just preach the gospel, he achieved the gospel. It was already good news that the eternal King had lowered himself to be born one of us. It was already good news that his perfect life was in progress, that he was doing everything the Father called him to do not just well, but with absolute perfection.

And there was much more good news to come! Even as he preached the gospel publicly during his ministry, Jesus continued to achieve it with complete love and compassion for his neighbors, with total faithfulness to his Father's Word, with trustworthy teaching to his disciples and to everyone. He carried the good news to its finish on Good Friday, when he declared it was finished – the holy life was lived, and the sacrificial death, when all our sin was laid on him and paid for, was at hand.

And we know this good news is true – we know Jesus has lived perfectly for our sake and died for our sins – because there was more good news on Easter morning. **"He is not; he has risen, just as he said!"** Jesus' resurrection is God's guarantee that the good news – the gospel – is genuine.

And here is what happens when a sinner believes it, as Jesus was calling them to do. You heard it earlier from St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians: **One died for all; therefore, all died...God made him, who did not know sin, to become sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.** In him, through faith in Christ, we become the righteousness of God. In Christ we are made perfect to God.

Saints Peter and Andrew, James and John, had heard the good news. And the Spirit had brought them to faith in Jesus. They were now the righteousness of God. And so they were not just qualified to come, to follow, and to fish for men; they were not just good to go; they were perfect to go and work in Jesus' service, to answer his call. They had, by the Spirit's grace, answered the call to believe the gospel. Now they were perfect to answer Christ's call to follow and to work.

You are also perfected to serve in every way God has called you. Does it sound over the top to be called perfect? In those verses to the Corinthians, St. Paul uses a vital word. He writes: **So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away. The new has come!** All of the words are vital, really, but one that stands out especially is "creation." We use that word somewhat loosely sometimes, to refer to any imaginative work. But in the Bible, a creation is more than the work of vibrant mind; it is the work of God. It means to make something out of absolutely nothing, which only God can do. And before God took hold of our hearts with the gospel of Christ, that's what we were. Spiritually dead nothings. But God made us, through faith in Christ, his righteousness – and that's total perfection.

That's what you are in the eyes of God. Now here is Christ's simple but sublime call to you: in everything you do, in all the ways God has called you – be who you are. Live as the holy person he has called you to be in all ways he has given you to serve. You are not just good to go. You are perfect to go in God's service.

Is this to say that when you sin you stop being a Christian? No. It is to say that when you sin God forgives it in Christ and you remain holy in his eyes through faith in Christ. And it means that when you do sin you get up, wrap yourself back in the righteousness of God, and go to it again, with a perfectly fresh start. When you continue reading in the Gospels, you see how true this is. The sinful nature stuck to these four disciples, and often showed itself in quite ugly ways during Jesus' ministry. When it did, Jesus always patiently forgave and restored those disciples that repented and believed the good news. The same happens for you, when your sinful nature pokes through. God keeps you in the faith, and so forgives you and holds you in the righteousness of Christ.

But the good news of the gospel – righteousness in Christ – does compel us. It compelled four fishermen to come, follow, and fish for men. It compelled them to live out their righteousness until they reached life in heaven. And compel is the right word to use, because the Spirit gave it to Paul: **For the love of Christ compels us, because we came to this conclusion: One died for all; therefore, all died. And he died for all, so that those who live would no longer live for themselves but for him, who died in their place and was raised again.**

The love of Christ compels – or, even more literally – controls us. We are God's righteousness, and perfectly ready to go and live for him in every calling he gives us. In order to this, Christians must know what God calls them to do. He calls us all to repent and believe the good news, and, by his work of faith, we have. Our other calls vary. Because God is so kind, he gives us tremendous freedom in choosing them. For example, we have great freedom in what we will do for a living. But we should know that dealing drugs, for example, cannot be a righteous calling. That's an obvious example, but others are maybe not so clear, or becoming less clear because of our culture's influence. You are, for example, free to serve God

in the call of singlehood or marriage. But if it's marriage, you are not free to marry absolutely anyone or for any amount of time you choose. You are free to show love to your neighbor in many different ways, but you're not free to condone what they do against God's will, because that is never love. You are free to have children or not, but not free to have them and then neglect their spiritual needs.

We are the righteousness of God. In order to live in it in all our callings, we must know God's righteous will. This is part of being perfectly good to go in our callings: knowing God's will, so that the love of Christ in our hearts controls us how God desires. Peter and Andrew, James and John, knew some of God's will when Jesus called them to follow him. They knew he wanted them to believe the gospel, to go with Jesus, and to fish for men. And by this time they probably knew quite a bit more than that. But they still had a lot to learn from Jesus about the true nature of humility, about godly love for all people, about Christ-like sacrifice. Coming to faith happens instantly, but learning God's will takes time and learning. But we will do it, in order to live more fully **for him, who died in their place and was raised again.**

God has prepared you perfectly to answer his call to live for him. He has called to faith in the good news, and made you his righteousness. You follow him in faith, and now he calls you to live for him in all the callings he's given you. May Christ's love compel you, as you answer his calls with a life for him. Amen.