**Not the Leader You Expected--Jesus: The Mostly Unlikely Candidate**

**Luke 5:27- 39**

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This past spring we decided to have a tree taken down in our yard but we didn’t know whom to call. So Rich looked on line and called three people in our area; each came to give an estimate at the work we wanted to have done. The first one was on time, polite, and walking around the yard with us, seemed quite knowledgeable, describing what he would do with each tree and why and then presenting us with an estimate of the cost of each tree individually and the job in total. The second person that came was less professional, more casual; he felt the need to talk a lot about himself, giving his opinions on subjects not related to the task at hand. When asked, he couldn’t quite answer questions we had about specific trees and his demeanor communicated a very casual, “who cares” attitude. His estimate was considerably lower; he didn’t think we even needed all the work we suggested. And honestly, I don’t remember a thing about the third one except he said, “I’ll do whatever you want!” Then the problem became: whom should we hire? “Who would be the best candidate for the job?” That’s been the question that we’ve been thinking about here at the church as well, who is the best candidate: for our country and for our church?

As we consider who shall lead, we’ve been considering people whom God has called, unlikely as they may seem, throughout the biblical text. And today, we have another person to consider as an unlikely candidate for the job he was given, raising the ultimate question, “Who would be the best candidate for the job?”

Our biblical text reminds us that Jesus did some “hiring” of his own, as he picked those who would be disciples and those whom he would hang out with. The text this morning tells the story of how he invited a tax collector named Levi to “follow him”. Now you probably know that tax collectors then were not any more popular than they are now, even less so. They worked for the occupying government and their job was to strong arm their neighbors into paying what the Romans thought each citizen owed them, whether they had the resources to pay or not. The tax collector’s job was to make sure people paid up, anyway they could! If folks didn’t pay, the loss of revenue became the responsibility of the tax collector himself. And without his job, he couldn’t pay either. No one in the government cared how the tax collector got his money, just that he did. And so they were notorious for doing whatever they had to to get paid.

So this is the kind of guy Jesus latches onto; in essence Jesus recruits or “hires” Levi to join his crew. What’s interesting here that instead of the story telling us of how Levi “followed” Jesus, it tells us that Jesus followed him: to a party at his house where a whole bunch of other seedy folk just like him were hanging out. Word got out and Jesus’ reputation, not strong to begin with, began to take a slide. “He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners!” was the charge. And they were right. Not cause for a good review on Yelp or Angie’s List.

But then the story goes on: the Pharisees accuse Jesus’ disciples, this rather ordinary lot, of not following the religious rules of the day. Jesus defends them with an illustration that, while perhaps lost on us, would have been crystal clear to them. He says, “no one cuts out a piece of fabric from a new pair of pants and sews it on to an old pair; it doesn’t make sense! You’ll have wrecked the new pair and it won’t match the old!” And no one puts fresh water into a worn, cracked, dirty water bottle; the water will be ruined and the bottle will fall apart. Clean water should be put in a clean bottle!

What is Jesus saying?! He’s saying “I’m not doing things the way they’ve always been done; it’s time for something new!” It’s that familiar saying: We can’t keep doing things the same old way and expect new results! We’ve got to do something new, we’ve got to be open to something different in order to allow the freshness of God’s Spirit to work within us.

And so Jesus “hires” the unexpected, he chooses the tax collector, the fishermen; he hangs out with women, he adores children, and he choose as his friends the hungry, the poor, the marginalized, the outcast. These are the ones he picks to be his helpers, to call his friends. A new movement needs a fresh start; a new leader needs unexpected followers. And so just as God calls folks we would never, ever pick, so does Jesus invite the unsavory, the unliked, the untouchables even to join his family by choice.

Knowing this, the question comes back to us: who will we chose to lead us? Although it’s already been going on for a year, the presidential contest has really just begun. We will be inundated with speeches, advertisements, insults and assaults on characters and records. We will discover things we didn’t know and things we didn’t want or need to know. Hopefully we will hear about the policy and projections and possibilities each candidate envisions. Some of us know what we want; some of us have already lost the candidate we wanted to the process and so need to think about how we shift our allegiances, how we stay in the game. And in the end, weary as we will all be, we will need to make a choice; we will call a leader.

And at the same time, we are choosing a pastoral leader. There will be no “run off “ in this process; there will be no campaigning. But our Search Committee is continuing to reach out and to talk and listen to people God has put in our path, one of whom will be the one God invites us to know and love.

I was remembering that just about this time a year ago the Search Committee was asking you to complete surveys prioritizing your preferences for pastoral leadership. Did you want the person to be a good preacher? A faithful visitor of the sick and home bound? Did you want them to be a great teacher or community activist? Remember that? Let me remind you of what collectively you said your priorities for pastoral leadership were: Someone who nurtures fellowship, who provides pastoral care, who can enable church growth, someone with preaching skills, who can interpret the faith, who can develop our spiritual gifts and service, someone gifted in worship leading, someone who can help us call out new leaders from within our faith community.

In light of these priorities, suppose the Search Committee had two candidates with very different profiles. Who would you vote for? Which would you chose? (Remember what we’re looking for…)

Candidate A is a strong leader whose energy attracts people and generates creative ideas. This person is charismatic in that people are drawn toward them and they easily get to know lots of people in the denomination and community. They are very articulate, write clearly and effectively, and inspire others. They are well organized, make decisions quickly and with assurance, and can motivate people to get things done. Sounds great, right?!

Candidate B is a quiet leader, laid back, the kind who makes friends one at a time. This person moves around a lot, doesn’t write formal sermons but preaches whenever they get an invitation. Candidate B has been in trouble with the law and with the denomination, which does attracts the interest of some who like to keep tabs on this person just to see what will happen next. They are creative and willing to try new things. Candidate B knows the bible well but sometimes uses it in a way people find annoying or offensive. This person is more interested in what’s happening in the neighborhood than in the office, and hangs out with whomever they find there. They like children and take frequent vacations, not always letting folks know where they are going or when they’ll be back.

So the question is, which candidate would you choose? The one who is highly motivated, energized and can inspire creativity? Or the candidate who is has been in trouble with the law, hangs out with neighborhood folks and takes frequent vacations? Who should our Search Committee chose?

If you chose “candidate A” you chose the definition of a hypothetical dictator, reflecting the characteristics of someone who not only takes charge but who takes over! This person isn’t interested in the welfare of others but of pursuing their own agenda, convincing everyone that their way is the only way to see the world. But if you chose “candidate B”, the lawbreaker who hangs in the neighborhood and who retreats regularly, you chose Jesus! Jesus: the uneducated, unmarried, unsettled Jesus who wanders the countryside living off friends and family, sleeping on people’s couches, preaching where and when someone will hear him. You chose Jesus: who disobeyed his parents, who was always in trouble with the Romans and the Jews, who threw a temper tantrum in the Temple, who hung out with prostitutes and contagious sick people and tax collectors and sinners…. You chose Jesus, born in a cow stall to a carpenter and a teenaged mother without a home to call their own! Talk about an unlikely candidate to be the pastor of this or any church!!

So how do we decide who’s the best candidate for the job? We’ve been talking about all kinds of women and men whom God has used to serve God’s will and way in the world, folks who at first glance, would not make it to anyone’s short list! Gideon the warrior was afraid; Huldah, the prophet, was a woman! Then there was Jonah who ran the opposite way and Moses, whose first reaction was, “not me!” Both the Samaritan woman and Rahab are not exactly citizens in good standing, if you know what I mean, but God choses them! And God chose us! God choses people we would never pick in a million years, to lead and guide, to confront and defeat, to rescue and redeem. Everyone is capable of serving God and God’s reign, even those who seem least likely of all.

We all have expectations of leaders, and let me assure you, because they are human they will fail you every time! But God will not fail you. And God will not fail us in choosing our next pastoral leader: new wine requires new skins! New leadership requires a new faith in God’s guiding, providing hand. Believe that God is calling someone to love and serve you! Trust that God will prepare them for the ministry that is possible in this place. Open yourselves to God’s Spirit, so that you are prepared to be the new wineskin into which the gifts of the Vintner are poured. God chooses the unexpected; I know that because God chose me and you!