

## No Experience Necessary

Mark 1:14-20

Delivered: Central Christian Church, Fairmont, WV

"So imagine you're an ice cube and you got stuck in a blender and it was going to be turning on in three minutes. How would you get out of the blender in three minutes?"

Believe it or not, this was a question a friend of mine was asked during a job interview last week with a marketing firm. While she found herself already nervous and spend the car ride to the interview practicing questions she thought she'd be asked, she was taken off guard on how to answer this question as she wondered what was the right answer.

Along with first dates and public speaking, being on a job interview is ranked as one of the most anxious moments individuals will endure at some point in their life. And while there are plenty of self-help books written by professional job interview gurus to help people "land that dream job," let's be honest, all of us know what its like to be nervous on a job interview. Because for us, the purpose of a job interview is to show how experienced we are in a given field. Even if you're job finds you as an ice cube stuck in a blender.

As you may know, today is Pentecost Sunday. This is the last big Sunday before we enter ordinary time. So, we're wearing red today because red is the liturgical color of the Holy Spirit. Why do we wear red? Well, red is the color of fire and symbolizes the presence of God. Just as Moses saw the burning bush as a symbol of God's presence, we wear red today as a symbol of God's presence with us and in us. More importantly, we are reminded about the coming of the Spirit on that Pentecost after the resurrection and ascension of Christ.

Of course, the story of the coming of the Spirit is found in Acts 2, but today we are reading the Gospel lesson for this year's lectionary, John's Gospel, chapter 15:26-27, and chapter 16:4-15. Because before the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost, before the ascension of Jesus, before the resurrection and the crucifixion of Christ, Christ promises the disciples the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Even back in John 14, Jesus started talking about his leaving the disciples. He wanted them to understand that he would not always be with them – to walk with them, to heal and help alongside them, to speak for them.

Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid... I will not leave you desolate. . . . I will come to you... And the Counselor, the paraclete (which is the Greek word), the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send, he will teach you many things."

All of us had moments in our lives when we found ourselves doing a job which we didn't know how to do. Recently, I just started working as a professional for the Boy Scouts of America, where I work as a liaison between Cub Scout Packs and Boy Scout Troops in Monterey and our council office in San Jose.

While I was in Scouting a kid and familiar with the program, I often find myself stumped because I have scoutmasters coming to me each day asking for certain application forms for their boys, records of what youth got what merit badge, or what health form is needed for summer camp. While I find myself having to learn all the aspects of making working for the Boy Scouts not as fun as being a Boy Scout, I have been able to get by with this answer when I am asked something I don't know: "I am not sure, but I will find out and get back to you."

While this answer doesn't work for anyone, it has helped a novice scouting professional like me find something I can say in a job I still am learning how to do.

One of the most intriguing facts about the early disciples was that none of them came from professions or positions as religious leaders when Christ called them to follow him. And for them, I can imagine it was very hard to "learn on the job" and know what to say. If you think about it, Jesus didn't interview the disciples to see if they were a good disciple. He just called them, not based upon their religious education, their speaking ability, nor did he call their references to see if the last guy they followed recommended them. He went to where they were and called them as they were. Even if the job description didn't match their background.

"As far as we can tell, the twelve persons Jesus called to be his companions were ordinary men. As far as we can tell, Jesus didn't do background checks to determine IQ levels, financial acumen, professional skills, or temple education. He picked people probably much like you and me. Furthermore, his disciples were anything but perfect. Many times they misunderstood him. They often hesitated to follow him. Judas betrayed him and Peter denied him."

I think it often confusing why Jesus called these men to be not only his disciples but become the apostles—the very ones who were called to spread the gospel of Jesus to others. But I also wonder if the disciples wondered they were picked to spread the message of Christ to others? After all, while I would find myself lacking the confidence of doing a job that I didn't have the training to do, I also would find myself skeptical if I was told I would have to say something, I would be told what to say.

But why did Jesus call these particular men? Was Jesus really in need of a good marketing firm and could find no one else to represent his ministry? Was Jesus really out of touch and really could have used a hiring agency to find individuals who might have had a background in religious proclamation? Or do we see a pattern about who Jesus was and whom he wanted his followers to be? And if so, what portrait does this paint for us of what "the church" should be and who we should be as fellow "followers of Christ?"

As I mentioned last week, last year I finished a one-year assignment working as a residential hospital chaplain outside of Norfolk, Virginia. The assignment, which is part of a clinical education program, is designed to train those in ministry, regardless of their denomination or religion, how to be not only chaplains but to be a spiritual presence to others.

Through the residency, students in the program spend the majority of their time with patients in their hospital room or with patients and their families during crisis situations in the

emergency room. Our purpose was not to evangelize or share our particular theological or spiritual viewpoint. But rather, our purpose was to listen to others, feel their frustrations and fears, and be a spiritual presence to them through our presence being there.

One common struggle most students in this program face with as they begin their residency is feeling like they don't have the credentials to be there. While most in the program (like myself) are not ordained ministers yet, most patients did not know we were "chaplains in training" and would see us as ordained clergy, coming into their room with vast amounts of experience and answer every question as the meaning of life or whether or not Jesus was left or right handed.

For students in the program, being seen as a real chaplain is a lot of pressure. Especially since my students are just out of the seminary who have limited experience doing ministry.

I like many of my colleagues felt this insecurity and inexperience being afraid that I wouldn't know what to do, particularly when I found myself being called to the emergency room when there was a crisis or unexpected death.

One of the ways student chaplains compensate this insecurity when they start the program is by trying to emulate the more experienced chaplains. For me, it was an experienced chaplain of the hospital named Kerry whom I looked up to as an example of what to do. While Kerry, who is a tremendous man of faith, he is also someone who made chaplaincy look too easy.

When I shadowed him the first time, I remember seeing how confident he was when he went into a room where a woman who had just lost her husband. Gently, he placed his hand on her shoulder, and through his calming presence, he said words which seemed not just reassuring, but also poetic. After our visit, I saw him use his charm and charisma to bring peace to the woman by giving her a hug of reassurance and even got her to smile as her daughter came to pick her up.

As you can guess, I quickly learned I was no Kerry the first night when it came to be the only chaplain in the hospital and I was called the Emergency Room.

While I can't remember who the patient was that had died, I do remember being called into the emergency room and asked to meet the family in a private room in the back. While on my way back to the room, I reminded myself to pretend I was Kerry. But upon entering the room, I quickly found myself overwhelmed and nervous were a large family of brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, neighbors, and friends had gathered. Some were crying lightly, some were wailing, and some sat with blank looks on their face.

"I didn't know what to do," I remembered telling my instructor, who is a Disciples of Christ minister that ran my program. "I felt so nervous, so inexperienced, the only thing I could do was ask if they wanted water, crackers, or a blanket. I felt like I wasn't a chaplain but a flight attendant!"

How often is it do we find ourselves feeling inexperienced when we are faced with something new and unexpected? How often do we find ourselves feeling inadequate when we are called upon to do something with great responsibility but it seems to be overwhelming to us? And how often do we find ourselves feeling fearing we aren't able to keep the expectation of what others think who we should be or more importantly, how we think who we should be?

Perhaps for some of us, it's facing a new change unexpectedly. Perhaps it's the feeling of inexperience when we learn we are going to be a new parent or we begin a new relationship? Maybe for some of us, it's beginning a new job which has a lot of pressure and a lot on the line and we feel overwhelmed by the task at hand? Or maybe it's about the fear of not meeting up to that expectation people have for us. That fear of disappointing our children or that fear of disappointing God?

You see, no matter who we are or where we are at one our spiritual journey, we find ourselves feeling like the inexperienced fishermen who has been asked to do something we are not familiar with. For Simon, James, John, and Andrew, their life had been about fishing and being on the sea. They did not know about preaching, teaching, and evangelizing. Yet despite being in experiences, it was Jesus who called them where they were at in their lives at that time—just as who they are—there imperfections, t their doubts, and even their troublesome pasts. Jesus used them as status-quo to do remarkable things.

Shortly after my first on-call emergency room call experience, I remember talking with Sister Grace, one of the Catholic Sisters in Our Hospital. Sister Grace, who had been in ministry for over 40 years, spent most of her time as a hospital chaplain. And had an ability to bring calm and stillness to people—even us nervous students. When I told her about my experience, I remember her saying to me,

"Don't spend your time worrying about your inexperience or your insecurities. Spend your time open to seeing how God is using you, right in that moment, just as you are. All you need to do is show up—God's grace has the rest."

While I never really got over my nervousness and insecurities, particularly when I was called during situations in the emergency room towards the end of my residency, I did find myself learning not to pretend to be chaplain Kerry, but to be Chaplain Chris and to own my anxieties, my own doubts, and simply be present and let God use me in that moment for others in need.

"God even uses us when we nervously offer water and crackers too," Sister Grace said.

Learning to love ourselves as who we are is hard to do. Especially since we all have a mindset of "if I just made a little more money" "if I just lost a little more weight" "If I just had more experience. If I just had the answers. If I just knew what to say."

Writer and theologian Parker Palmer has spent most of his life discerning how God uses us as who we to full-fill what God has called us to be. And in his book, *Let Your Life Speak*, Palmer talks about how God already shaped us from the very beginning and not who

we try to shape ourselves as adults. He writes:

A few years ago, my daughter and her newborn baby came to live with me for a while. Watching my granddaughter from her earliest days on earth, I was able, in my early fifties, to see something that had eluded me as a twenty-something parent: my granddaughter arrived in the world as this kind of person rather than that, or that, or that.

She did not show up as raw material to be shaped into whatever image the world might want her to take. She arrived with her own gifted form, with the shape of her own sacred soul. Biblical faith calls it the image of God in which we are all created. Thomas Merton calls it true self. Quakers call it the inner light, or "that of God" in every person. The humanist tradition calls it identity and integrity. No matter what you call it, it is a pearl of great price.

In those early days of my granddaughter's life, I began observing the inclinations and proclivities that were planted in her at birth. I noticed, and I still notice, what she likes and dislikes, what she is drawn toward and repelled by, how she moves, what she does, what she says.

I am gathering my observations in a letter. When my grand-daughter reaches her late teens or early twenties, I will make sure that my letter finds its way to her, with a preface something like this: "Here is a sketch of who you were from your earliest in this world. It is not a definitive picture--only you can draw that. But it was sketched by a person who loves you very much. Perhaps these notes Willie help you do sooner something grandfather did only later: remember who you were when you first arrived and reclaim the gift of true self."

It's a common theme we see in scripture, it's God calling ordinary people to do extraordinary things. And Christ's disciples were no different. Simon, James, John, and Andrew were just fisherman—not versed or educated. Yet already shaped by God and called by Christ just as who they were.

Writer Anne Lamott writes in her book, "Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith: "It's funny: I always imagined when I was a kid that adults had some kind of inner toolbox full of shiny tools: the saw of discernment, the hammer of wisdom, the sandpaper of patience. But then when I grew up I found that life handed you these rusty bent old tools - friendships, prayer, conscience, honesty - and said 'do the best you can with these, they will have to do'. And mostly, against all odds, they do."

My friends, despite our insecurities, our doubts, our lack of experience, God has called upon us to be the church. Not a church of perfectionists, clean-slated followers who don't make mistakes, that have the right experience and that always get along. Rather, God calls upon all of us, our own different backgrounds, our own different skills, our own different theological beliefs and shall I say, different political beliefs, to proclaim to the world of Jesus love and a promise of redemption and everlasting life through him.

But more importantly, it's our God who shaped us are who we are to be in a relationship with Jesus Christ as who we are. A calling for a relationship which doesn't require us to have the perfect skills or be the perfect person. A calling that doesn't require us to change who we are or be ashamed who we are or what we did in the past. But a calling that says we are accepted us who we are and unconditionally loved as who we are. And God

is going to use us and give us the words to say when we are called to bring hope in the lives of those around it who need it.

And so when we find ourselves overwhelmed by our inexperienced, insecure about our abilities, or struggling to know what to say to someone who is in pain—remember that you have been shaped by the hands of God just as you are. God will give you the gifts, the talents, and even the words of what to say and when to say it. And when you find yourselves in new situations of uncertainty that cause doubt, remember the words of Sister Grace—just show up. And allow God's grace to do the rest.

#### Bibliography

*Feasting on the Word: preaching the Revised common lectionary.* By David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville (Ky.): Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. N. pag. Print.

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