

Luke 5:1-11, February 10, 2019      Grace and Change

So many things about this morning make for a rich and happy worship experience, but I am especially thinking about two of the rites unique to this morning: the dedication of our new communion ware and the installation of our council members. Both are cause for reflection and rejoicing. And both represent change. Our communion ware is given in memory of Delores Jackson's Mom, Helen Swanson, as well as in honor of all who have served on the altar committee over the years of our congregation's existence. Not all of you had the opportunity to know Helen, but she was a funny, warm, strong, magnificent woman—just as you'd expect Delores' Mom to be! Delores shared with me in an email that she had memories from her girlhood, of when her Mom, Helen, was on church cleaning and altar duty, preparing for Holy Communion. Delores wrote, "I remember going with her as child on Saturday to clean the church, turn up the heat & it was my job to fill all those little communion cups with wine with a cream pitcher. We have come a long way!" Well, that's so, isn't it? Things have changed. It's not just that we're replacing our present paten and chalice, which were getting cracks and had some other issues, with a new paten and chalice. Lots of other changes are wrapped up in this change, too. In those days that Delores is remembering, we probably communed quarterly, and eventually maybe once a month. Communion was always at the altar rail. Everyone got their tiny pre-filled cup and bit of bread. There was never communion by intinction, as we now do the majority of the time, so the style of chalice and paten that we dedicated today would have seemed very strange. There was also probably no concern about offering gluten free wafers, or grape juice in place of wine, and children didn't

commune. . Again---things have changed. Traditions change! Awareness of inclusion changes!

It's not just things and traditions that change, though; people also change. Look at our list of those being installed for council, the other rite unique to this morning. This list represents change. Some on that list are long time members and/or descendants of long time church and community members, like Bjorn Ojard or Steve Carlson, or Chris Skadberg or Randi Alreck. Some, like Michael Dent and Mike Stiff are far from old-timers, but have been around for a little while. Others, like Sharon Shelerud, Ed Lee, Dale Davidson or Helene Hedlund only joined relatively recently and are already serving on council! So while some of those names would have seemed familiar to our forebears, others are completely new. Groups of people change. And not only do we change in terms of group make up, we change internally. Because it wouldn't surprise me if there are some names on that list of council people, who, if you had chanced to ask them 5 or 10 years ago if they'd be active members of a church and serving as council members or officers, would have thought you were crazy! One of the most hopeful signs ever in this world is that not only can things or traditions change, but *people* can change, even within themselves. Without that capacity, where would we be? Wouldn't all of us be able to think of ways that we have changed, for the better, over time? And we are witnesses to this kind of change in both of our lessons this morning---we see change happening within folks, dramatic change actually. And the change happens because and after they are the recipients of grace. In each lesson, and I'm thinking maybe this holds true for our lives, too, we will see grace and change.

Let's consider first the grace and change that happens in our Gospel lesson. We read in this text how Peter and his three fishing partners have fished the night through without success. This isn't just the disappointment we feel when we don't catch fish when we're out for a day of recreation; this was these men's livelihood, a reality that this community once knew very well. While the anglers clean their nets after their futile night's work, Jesus has used one of their boats to teach and preach from, as the crowd on the shore was so large. Jesus was a carpenter, not a fisherman, as far as these four were concerned. So who is he to tell them their job? Isn't it amazing they were willing to take his fishing advice and try again? Especially when they are weary and hungry and have just found no fish to be present? Jesus urges them to go out into deeper water and try again. For some crazy reason, impulsive Peter is willing to take him seriously, and he does as he is told. The result is a staggering catch, a once-in-a-lifetime haul of fish, an absolute miracle of a result. But, Peter doesn't react as we might imagine he would. He doesn't crow over the catch! He doesn't line up to have his photo taken with the fish and submit his name for any local fishing contests. Instead, he reacts as people sometimes do when they are confronted by that which is holy. He feels fearful, guilty, small and inadequate. He tells Jesus, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.!" But Jesus responds: "Don't be afraid, Peter. You'll be catching people from now on." Our lesson for today ends by telling us, "When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him."

It's easy to miss the significance of that final sentence. What are these four professional anglers leaving behind, in that leaving everything? Among other things,

they're leaving behind the phenomenal catch they just had. It's like winning the lottery after years of buying tickets and then just leaving behind all of your winnings. Maybe they could have been set for life based on that huge haul of fish. That catch could have dramatically changed their lives, and it did---but not in the way we would have expected. They're not only letting go of the familiarity of the present, but of their dreams for the future. They leave it behind and follow Jesus. Talk about change, both external and internal! Is it any wonder that Jesus reassures Peter, "Don't be afraid."? They were doing a fearsome thing. They were leaving behind security and facing a future full of unknowns. But we see here the pattern here of grace and change. Where was the grace? Perhaps first, that they happened to be present at that time and place when Jesus is also present and needs a floating pulpit. What were the odds? And next, there is grace in Jesus taking an interest in them and encouraging them to fish further. Finally, we see that abundant quality that often accompanies grace in that enormous catch of fish they then achieve, an abundance of grace that nearly sinks their boats. There is grace, and then there is change; they leave behind one way of life and embrace another.

The same dynamic of grace and change operates in our lesson from Corinthians, Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. You likely recall Paul's back story. Paul was a combination of traditional Judaism, embraced with fanatical zeal, and cosmopolitan Greco-Roman polish; he was a Jew in the best of standing, but lived outside of Palestine and was, in fact, a Roman citizen, a man of learning and standing. He grew up in the city of Tarsus, one of the largest trade centers on the Mediterranean coast in Asia Minor. He was a lawyer and a Pharisee, one who was making a name for himself in his ardent

persecution of Christian. From his perspective, he was a successful man on the rise to even greater success. And then everything changes for him. There was grace and there was change. The grace happened in a strange manner, as it sometimes does. You remember how Paul was traveling on the road to Damascus in order to persecute the Christians there, when he was literally blinded by a light and the voice of the Lord asked him why he was persecuting Him. Paul, shell-shocked, was led, blind and bewildered, to the nearest town. It was several days before God sent a believer to restore Paul's sight and fill him in on his calling. A calling he embraced in a way that no other of his Christian contemporaries could have managed. Paul, like Peter, leaves behind his familiar life. He leaves behind his position as a learned, respected, successful man. He ends up, instead, doing tent-making part time and living an itinerant lifestyle to preach the gospel. He left behind the known for the unknown, when he heard God's call, just as Peter did. Also like Peter, Paul found that his encounter with the holy had left him with a sense of unworthiness and guilt. In fact, in our lesson today, he writes, "For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." But then he goes on to write one of my favorite verses in the New Testament: "But, by the grace of God I am what I am, and God's grace towards me has not been in vain." There is grace. And there is change.

I really do believe that most of us can find parts of our own stories contained within these Scripture texts. It's hard to imagine any one of us not at some point or other having been the recipient of grace which led to change—not only external changes like getting married or having children, for example—but internal changes—like growing into

someone more willing to sacrifice our comfort and convenience for the sake of someone else, more able to be kind and patient with someone who needs that, more able to be strong in the face of adversity when we might once have just given up. It's not that we're perfect by any means, or even that we're realistically on our way there; as Lutherans we freely acknowledge we are always a combination of saint and sinner, always a work in progress. But, I think there's something freeing in that acknowledgement. We know our limitations, most of us all too well. We understand the sense of guilt or sin or inadequacy or self doubt that both Paul and Peter expressed. But that doesn't matter. It doesn't mean we aren't already valued, cherished, and loved by God, any more than the imperfections of those around us prevent us from loving and valuing them. It also doesn't mean that we don't somehow qualify to be called by God. God calls a murderer of Christians to be the greatest exponent of Christianity; God calls rough-edged fishermen to spread a Gospel of grace to a world they hardly knew existed beyond the boundaries of their tiny, occupied nation. As Paul writes, and I hope we can each take these words to heart: "By the grace of God, I am what I am." You may not be flawless, but God's grace has created you, guided you, and brought you to this present moment. Not only are you already loved, redeemed, valued, and called, but you are capable of change. Which really is the basis of hope for us personally, and for our world, corporately. "God's grace towards me has not been in vain", Paul wrote. And it wasn't. Paul experienced a profound change as a result of his encounter with grace, and he ended up as this fledgling's faith most prominent exponent and as one of the world's greatest agents of change ever. So, I think our takeaway might be: We're far from perfect, always limited, sinful, broken. But we are

enough. We are loved, valued, redeemed, and called. Already. And the grace that God showers on us in so many different ways changes us. We can and do change. We see it in ourselves. We see it in those around us. We see it in the witness of Scripture and tradition. We're about to sing a version of Amazing Grace. The man who wrote Amazing Grace, John Newton, went from being a slave trader to a minister of the Gospel and an abolitionist , after his encounter with grace. Grace and change. God's grace embraces us as we are and changes us in ways we can hardly imagine. That's why we call that grace "amazing". Amen.