

“He Couldn’t Do It Alone”  
Mark 1:14-20  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

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Westminster, Greenville  
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There’s been a lot of talk in the news and on social media in recent weeks about how divided our country is, right?

You’ve heard it, we’ve all heard it.  
As a country, we’re more divided than ever.  
And because of the pandemic, many of us feel more DISTANT from each other than ever.

And there’s truth to those statements, to be sure.

There is something in all of us, right now, that is really craving a stronger sense of community—perhaps more so than we’ve ever craved it before.

And yet, it’s not just the past few weeks or months or even the past year that’s made us feel that way. And it’s not just our country that has been feeling this way.

Some time ago, Great Britain acted to appoint a new government official—not for economic development,  
not for better foreign relations—  
they appointed a new official for loneliness.

“For far too many people, loneliness is the sad reality of modern life,” the Prime Minister said. “I want to confront this challenge for our society and for all of us to take action to address the loneliness endured

by the elderly...by those who have lost loved ones—people who have no one to talk to or share their experience with.”<sup>1</sup>

Mind you, this was over two years BEFORE the pandemic hit our world.

All of us have a need for community—we’ve always had it.  
It’s not just in modern times.  
It was a need back in biblical times.

Do you remember how, in the opening chapter of Genesis, God creates the light, and calls it good, and God creates the earth and the seas, and calls it good, and everything God creates is very good...do you know when the first time occurs that something is “not good”?

In chapter two, when God notices that there’s only person, and that person is alone. God says: “It is not good.”

Even the biblical writers knew about our need for community.

And so we come to our text from Mark for today, where we’re told that Jesus began his ministry by calling disciples. By creating a new community.

Sometimes, I wonder if Jesus knew what he was getting himself into when he made that decision. After all, it’s not as though the disciples are always getting straight A’s for their faith!

In Chapter 4, Jesus stills a storm.  
The disciples are afraid.

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<sup>1</sup> Ceylan Yeginsu, “Britain Tackles Loneliness,” The New York Times, January 17, 2018.

Jesus says to them: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

In Chapter 10, James and John ask Jesus to let them sit at his right hand and his left when he comes again in glory. And what happens after that?

Mark writes:

“When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.”

So...there’s jockeying for position in the community created by Jesus. And there’s fear instead of faith in the community created by Jesus.

And yet, despite all the headaches and heartache that came along with this group—Jesus **INSISTED** on community.

And that lesson carried over to the early church.

As the Apostle Paul puts it in our Epistle Lesson for today:

“...so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.”

All of which has something to say to us in our moment today.

This is a challenging time to be God’s church.

One reason is that all our normal faith community rhythms have been disrupted for the better part of a year.

But another reason is that we have different views on things, right?

Different views about the pandemic, and how our church should respond.

Different views about the challenges that face our country, and how our country ought to respond.

I recall, when I interviewed with the PNC—I’ve told you this before—they asked me what kind of congregation I was serving at that time in Dallas, and I told them “Purple”—in other words, red and blue voters, all bundled up together. And they laughed, and said, “That’s what we are here as well.”

That’s always been a good thing to me.  
It still is.

To serve a congregation that has multiple viewpoints on the way the world ought to work, and how Westminster ought to respond to show God’s love and justice and grace in God’s world...this is not a flaw.

It is a gift.  
All of which, in my mind, raises a very important question:

What holds us together?  
Where is our common ground as God’s church, at this moment in our world?

Surely it goes deeper than our desire to be purple.

In one of her recent books, Anne Lamott writes:

“If I were going to begin practicing the presence of God  
for the first time today, [I would] begin  
by admitting the three...truths of our existence:

that we are so ruined,  
and so loved,

and in charge of so little.”<sup>2</sup>

I wonder if we can find common ground in Lamott’s three truths.

Let’s start with her first: *we are so ruined...*

That’s not intended to be a depressing statement.

Lamott means it as a HOPEFUL statement.

Let me get at it like this.

A few years ago, Pew research conducted a study on what factors made a difference for people when they were looking for a new church home. In many ways, the answers were predictable:

The welcome that they received,  
 the style of worship,  
 the location of the church,  
 the quality of sermons,  
 the quality of children’s programming,  
 knowing people who went to the church,  
 having an opportunity to volunteer...<sup>3</sup>

And yet, truth be told, I’m a bit suspicious of those reasons.

I suspect we ALSO join a church because at a much deeper level, you and I want a place where we can admit our own BROKENNESS. Where we can be vulnerable—ruined, as Lamott puts it—and the people around us, in our faith community, will not run away.

This was a lesson that hit home for me during my first year in ministry.

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Found at <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/08/23/choosing-a-new-church-or-house-of-worship>.

In the first church I served, I was teaching a class, and I made copies of a chapter of a book in preparation for the class.

We had a terrific discussion that evening.

The day after the class, one of the participants knocked on my office door.

Ah, good, I thought. He wants to continue the discussion from the class.

He entered my office and said, “Those copies you made from that book—how could you do that?”

“Excuse me?”

“That was ILLEGAL!” he barked at me. “You didn’t have permission from the publisher to do that!”

What the heck is he talking about?

It’s just one chapter of one book for one class for OUR church.

“I’ve published a couple of textbooks,” he went on to tell me. “And when people buy my book—that’s how I make money from all the work that I’ve put into my book. But when you make copies from a book, and distribute them freely, you’re robbing people like me of the earnings we’re supposed to receive!”

Well—I had never been called a THIEF in church before!

And I thought—I’m done with him.

I don’t have to be his pastor.

I’ll let my colleague, my boss—I’ll let him be his pastor.

And I told friends and family about this nutty guy my who got offended at me for copying materials for a class. (Never mind that he was correct—I **was copying** material that I had no permission to copy.)

Well, a number of months later, the same guy approached me in the church parking lot.

“Oh great,” I thought. “This guy again...”

He said, “Ben, I’ve been chewing on this for months, and I owe you an apology. I never should have said what I said to you in your office that day. Will you forgive me?”

And I felt about THIS big.

After all, I had written him off, given up on our relationship, even though I was one of his pastors.

But this brother-in-Christ—he had something to teach me—about what it means to be in Christian community.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once put it:

We all have “a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it. But God’s grace speedily shatters such dreams...”

In Christian community, says Bonhoeffer, none of us “can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and Deed which really binds us together—the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

We are so ruined,  
                   AND so loved—and that love that Christ has shown  
 each of us—we are called to show one another.

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<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, New York: HarperCollins, 1954.

A colleague who consults with congregations of various denominations wrote the following as a part of his year-end report last month:

“Congregations need to be gentle and forbearing with one another. No sentence should be uttered that begins with ‘well, it’s obvious that we should...’

“Nothing is ‘obvious’ in this unprecedented...[time]! We are all looking for the light God will provide for our way forward. And we need all of us together to help find, nurture, share, and reflect that light.”<sup>5</sup>

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I’m reminded of a story that Father Gregory Boyle tells.

Before Boyle became a nationally known author and speaker, before he even began working with gangs in Los Angeles, he was a teacher.

It was his first day of teaching at Loyola High School.

He was nervous, so before his first class he stopped by the room of a veteran teacher named Donna.

“It’s my first day—” Boyle said. “Give me some advice.”

“Two things,” she replied. “One: know all their names by tomorrow. Two: It’s more important that they know you than that they know what ya know.”

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<sup>5</sup> From the Rev. Mark Ramsey, “Questions of the Year,” December 15, 2020, at The Ministry Collaborative, [Center For Pastoral Leadership | The Ministry Collaborative \(mministry.org\)](https://www.mministry.org/).

Father Boyle carried this advice forward into his current work with Homeboy Industries in LA.

One day he's at a camp.  
A kid approaches, all "swagger and pose."

"What's your name?" Boyle asks.  
"SNIPER," the kid sneers.

"Ok, look," says Boyle, "I have a feeling you didn't come into this world, and your mom took one look at you and said, 'Sniper.' So, come on, dog, what's your name?"

He relents a little: "Gonzalez," he says.

"Okay now, son, I know the staff here call you by your last name. I'm not down with that. Tell me, what's your mom call you?"

The kid softens...there is embarrassment...newfound vulnerability.

"Napoleon," he manages to squeak out.

"Wow," says Boyle, "That's a fine, noble, historic name. But I'm almost positive that when your mom calls you, she doesn't use the whole nine yards. Come on...what's your mom call you?"

Then I watch him go to some far, distant place, writes Boyle.  
It's a place he has not visited for some time.  
The voice changes, the body language changes.

"Sometimes—" his voice is so quiet— "sometimes...when my mom's not mad at me...she calls me...Napito."

Boyle writes: “I watched this kid move, transformed, from Sniper to Gonzalez...to Napoleon to Napito. We all just want to be called by the name our mom uses when she’s not mad at us...”<sup>6</sup>

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Did you know—you too have been called by name? Called by the love of God to be a part of this marvelous community of faith?

Called to follow as ONE community—wherever Jesus might go?

I think this is why Lamott offers her third truth:

**We are in control of so little.**

Like we need another reminder of THAT these days.

It sure sounds disappointing.

But I don’t think Jesus sees it that way.

I think Jesus WELCOMES those moments when we stop fooling ourselves and admit how little control we really have.

Did you notice in our text that Jesus does not tell the disciples exactly where they’re going?

He just says, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

And that’s what they do.

They don’t know where it’s going to lead them.

The pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian in NY City, Dr. Scott Black Johnston, arrived at his church in September of 2008.

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<sup>6</sup> Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, New York: Free Press, 2010.

It was an exciting time for him.  
 Prominent church in the largest city in our country.  
 Lots of momentum, lots of eagerness about getting started, about what he might be able to do.

But no sooner did he get underway than the bottom fell out of the economy. Pledging plummeted, giving sank, and immediately he was facing severe economic stress in his new congregation.

One particular morning, Dr. Johnston says he was feeling dejected, and he prayed one of those prayers that you and I tend to offer when we're afraid.

“Please God, see that there are no more shoes to DROP on us...  
 we can't take anymore—please, give us some good news!  
 No more shoes.”

Well, later that day, the chief sexton of the church knocked on his door.

“Scott,” he said, “I need to see you downstairs.”  
 “Not now,” was Scott's terse reply.

“No...you are going to want to see this.”

And so the two made their way downstairs to the front office, where two police officers were standing. Without missing a beat, the officers explained that they had just confiscated 700 pairs of counterfeit Timberland boots, and they were wondering if they could give them to the homeless shelter there, for the residents to use.

Scott Black Johnston prayed for no more shoes...and God sent him 700 pairs of Timberland boots.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I heard this story from Dr. Scott Black Johnston at the Mid-Winter Lectures at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 2009.

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I wonder what, or who, God is going to send our way?

When this pandemic is over, I wonder where God is going to ask  
Westminster Presbyterian Church to go?

Make no mistake, I am SO looking forward to connecting with all  
of you again in all the familiar ways.

But my other hope is that we won't settle for what's familiar.

My hope is that our church will be transformed by this pandemic—  
that God's GENTLENESS with us and God's FAITHFULNESS to us  
during this time will change us.

That we'll be open to *wherever* Jesus might lead us.

You see, long ago, a small group of fishermen—  
so ruined, so loved, in control of so little—  
they left their nets, their little world of familiarity,  
and they followed where Jesus led them.

May all of us do the same,  
and may we do so together.

Amen.