



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“He’s Not So Special”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Isaiah 6: 1-8; I Corinthians 15: 1-11; Luke 5: 1-11

As we get started, this morning, I want to begin by saying that this morning’s message, to a certain extent, is another side of the same coin that we were talking about last week. Those who were here will recall that our focus, last week, was on the human tendency to look inwards at our capacities and see that as the limitation on what we have to bring to the table in the face of life’s opportunities and challenges. We talked about not only the need to look beyond our selves and towards God in consider the capacity to meet the challenge, but I went as far as to say that we need to stop asking whether we, with God’s help, are up to the task, and instead to ask whether God is up to the task and how we can help.

It was in the context of talking about that, however, that I mentioned the recurrent biblical narrative of individuals rebuffing God’s call due to their own sense of self-limitation. Jeremiah thought he was too young. Isaiah thought he was too sinful. Moses didn’t think he could speak well enough. Peter deemed himself unworthy... And it was that portion of our reflections from last week that got me thinking about the drastic difference between perception and reality for those we tend to revere in our lives.

So, with all of that said, I found myself thinking back, this week, to an experience I had when I was a young boy living in north central New Jersey. Baseball was my thing as a kid and, living 30 miles dead west of Manhattan, the Yankees were my team at that stage of my life (a stage out of which I matured, thankfully, when we moved to Wisconsin 40 years ago). Anyway, I was part of the Little League All-Star Game in 1981 and was the MVP of that game. Now, don’t read too much into that! I was 7 years old – it likely meant that I only booted 12 balls while the others on the field booted 15. But, nonetheless, the distinction meant that I got the privilege of sitting next to the guest of honor at the All-Star banquet at the end of the season. And, who was that guest of honor? Mr. October himself, now MLB Hall of Famer, Reggie Jackson.

There’s a lot, of course, that I don’t remember about that night. What I do remember, however, is that the reason I don’t remember a lot is that the entire evening was something of a fog, for me, as I was awestruck in every moment to be near this baseball icon who was literally sitting beside me. I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know what to do. I was nearly paralyzed, both physically and emotionally, by the mere presence of this person I idolized as a child, and never once did it cross my mind, as a 7-year-old Little Leaguer, that, as they say, he put his pants on one leg at a time just like everyone else.

That seems to be, however, our human nature. We love to lift people up onto a pedestal. (There seems to be a social dynamic in which we seem to love to knock them off those pedestals as well, but that's a conversation for another time.) The truth of the human experience is that we tend to revere people who do things we would love to do, or accomplish things we've dreamed of accomplishing and, both consciously and subconsciously, we draw some sort of base distinction between how special they are and how we are just not! It's true for athletes. It's true for musicians. It's true for actors and actresses. We even do it with politicians, academics and the corporate elite. There seems to be this base human tendency to look at those who have accomplished remarkable things and to elevate them onto these pedestals in a way that loses any sense of the shared humanity that exists between us. There is a lot about that, I would argue, that has broad implications for our mental health and social wellbeing. My point in getting to it today, however, is that it has enormous impact on these lives of discipleship that we lead, because we far too often do the same thing there!

Just ask yourself what individuals from the biblical narrative you look up to or revere in some way. Take a moment and allow the list to begin to form in your mind of those 'heroes' of the Bible that stand out to you in some remarkable way. For many, I am sure, Jesus quickly comes to mind, but we're going to set that one aside. Who else comes to mind? My guess is that many of you are thinking about Noah, or Abraham, or Moses, or Joshua, or David, or Ruth, or Rahab, or Joseph, or Mary, or Peter, or Paul, or James, or John, you likely have others. The point is that it's not hard to think of those whom we tend to put up on those pedestals in reverence to that which they were/did/achieved in the story of our faith. It's not hard to come up with a list of heroes that we revere when we look at their stories in the Bible. It is not hard to come up with a list of those people who were truly special, and who played those key parts in the unfolding of God's story. But that, right there, is precisely the problem!

The issue that we run into in this human tendency to lift people up on a pedestal is that immediately draw a distinction between them and us. The issue that we run into is that we look at how special they are, and how special we aren't, and we immediately define this gap that stands between them and us. And, yes, there are sometimes distinctions. Most elite athletes have natural capacities and abilities that we don't. Most successful musicians have gifts that we don't. But when we put these people on those pedestals, we very quickly lose any sense of the shared humanity between us and them and, when we pull that tendency into the realm of our faith, we lose track of the fundamental truth that all of these people that we revere as so remarkable and special, really weren't!

Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Ruth, Rahab, Peter, James, John, Mary, Paul... Each and every one of these individuals played extraordinary roles in the unfolding of God's story throughout the biblical narrative. Each and every one of these people was a special part of the history of our faith. But there was nothing special about these people.

- Abraham, Moses and David were farmers... shepherds.
- Ruth was a Moabite foreigner who didn't belong where she was.
- Rahab was a prostitute.
- Mary was just a young woman, and Joseph was a simple carpenter.
- Peter was a fisherman.
- Matthew was a tax collector.

- And Paul, when he was Saul, fought against everything he eventually began to preach throughout the world.

Each and every one of these individuals played extraordinary roles in the unfolding of God's story throughout the biblical narrative. Each and every one of these people was a special part of the history of our faith. But there was nothing special about these people. These were broken, imperfect, faulty people, just like you and me, who had one thing in common – they weren't going to let the grace of God be bestowed upon them in vain.

That's the line that grabbed on to me from this passage in I Corinthians 15.

“For I am the least of the apostles,” Paul writes, “unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I but the grace of God that is with me.” (I Corinthians 15: 9-10)

Now, that latter part, ‘it was not I but the grace of God that is with me,’ is precisely what we were talking about last week. The other clear point that Paul makes in this passage, however, is to explain that he is who he is because of God's love in his life, and that he does what he does as a direct reflection of that love so that the gift that God has given him is not wasted or given in vain. That, in a nutshell, is what each and every one of these revered characters of our faith story have in common.

Look at the vision of Isaiah, so terrified in finding himself in the presence of God in such a sinful state. The grace and forgiveness of God is made clear in and through the coal that is touched to his lips, and everything that follows in Isaiah's life is a reflection of him living so as to ensure that that gift was not given in vain.

Look at that story of the call of the first Disciples in Luke. Our attention tends to be drawn to the empty nets suddenly filled to the point of bursting with the fish they are catching, but Simon Peter's heart and mind are immediately drawn to the Godly glory of Jesus as compared to his own unworthiness in that moment. “Go away from me,” he cries out. Jesus looks right past Peter's concern, ignores his reticence, and welcomes him. And everything that follows in Simon Peter's life is a reflection of him living so as to ensure that this gift was not given in vain.

You could do this with one story to the next. As you look at each and every one of these heroes of our faith that we so revere on the pedestals on which we have placed them, what you find again and again is that they have two things in common.

- First and foremost, each and every one of these people was a special part of the history of our faith, but there was nothing special about these people. These were broken, imperfect, faulty people, just like you and me.
- Second, however, they were not going to let the grace of God be bestowed upon them in vain. They were going to seek to live, albeit often still imperfectly, lives worthy of the gift they'd been given.

Far too often, our human proclivity to lift our ‘heroes’ up onto pedestals causes us to lose sight, especially in the context of our faith, that they were no different than us. They weren't more

gifted than us. They weren't more loved than us. They weren't more special than us. They were broken, imperfect, faulty people who experienced the grace of God and decided to respond to God's call in a way that sought to make sure that God's grace was never given in vain, and I simply find myself wondering how often our faulty perception, of how special they were, gets in the way of us doing the same.