

A Cast of Losers

I Samuel 16:1, 6-13; Luke 7:36-50

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There's a theme that threads its way throughout the Bible, and the theme is this: God always seems to choose the wrong people. Or maybe a better way to say it is that God never seems to choose the people that we think are the "right" people; God never seems to choose the people we would choose. God always comes down on the side of the least likely, the neediest, the last, the least, the lost, the losers.

If you were to read your way through the Gospel of Luke, by the time you get to today's reading in Luke 7, you would have seen how time and again God/Jesus surprises us with grace for those who are undeserving.

Here's how Luke tells the story. He begins his gospel telling about how God chose an unwed teenage girl to be the mother of the Savior of the World. She was probably not the candidate most people would have chosen.

When it is time for the child to be born, the people to whom the heavenly angels announce the birth are a bunch of shepherds. Back in that day, shepherding was not what you would call a noble profession. Shepherds were hired to look after sheep that were owned by someone else. Shepherds did not have a reputation of being particularly reliable, dependable. They were pretty much at the bottom of the economic ladder.

If I had been in charge of announcing the birth of the messiah, I'd have gone to the kings, the high priests, the power people, the people with standing. God chose shepherds. God never seems to choose the people that we would choose.

When Jesus begins his ministry, the first people he calls to be his followers are fishermen. Fishermen were probably not as quite low on the economic ladder as shepherds, but they certainly weren't held in highest regard either. They were manual laborers who got their hands dirty doing dangerous and often unreliable work. Not the kind of people that someone would choose if that person were trying to make a big impact.

Then Jesus launches out on his ministry, and here are the people Jesus embraces: a man with leprosy (5:12-16), a paralyzed man who is so dependent on others that he needs for his friends to lower him down through a hole in the roof of the house so that he can get to Jesus (5:17-26). Then Jesus calls another disciple; this time it's a hated tax collector, the very embodiment of sinner (5:27-32). If you were to look up the word "sinner" in the dictionary, beside it would be a picture of a tax collector.

In chapter 6 Luke gives us a little interlude from all Jesus' interactions with people to focus on Jesus' teachings. It's here that Jesus says things like: "Blessed are the poor," and "Love your enemies," and "Do good to those who hate you," and "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful," and "Do not judge." And he tells the illustration of the person who is more concerned about the speck in his neighbor's eye than about the log in his own eye.

After that brief teaching interlude, Jesus goes back to choosing the wrong people. Next he heals a slave that belonged to a Roman soldier —another outsider (7:1-10). Think about that for a minute: the person Jesus healed was a slave, which meant that he

had no standing. And to make matters worse, he was owned by a Roman soldier. The Romans were the enemy, and this soldier was probably a gentile. You can't get much farther outside the circle of respectability than the slave of a Roman soldier.

Then comes the passage that Lee preached on last Sunday, where Jesus raised from the dead the son of a widow (7:11-17). Back in that day, before there were social safety nets like social security, the way the aged were cared for was by their children. So someone like this widow—who had no husband and no children—was helpless, as good as dead.

All through the gospel of Luke you see this theme being played out over and over again: God/Jesus never seems to choose the right person, the respectable person. He never seems to choose the person that we would choose.

But if you think about it, Luke is just continuing the theme that goes all the way back to the Old Testament.

Of the great patriarchs of Judaism: Abraham was a liar, Jacob was a cheat, Joseph was an egotist. Other well known figures in the Old Testament: Noah got drunk; Moses killed a guy; Jonah did the exact opposite of what God called him to do. And then there's David. As time went by, King David was regarded as the greatest of the kings of Israel. But even the great king David was a flawed person, an adulterer and murderer.

I read for today's Old Testament lesson about the time that David was chosen to be the next king. Here's how that came about: Samuel, the priest, was told by God to go to the house of Jesse, and there God would show Samuel the one that God had chosen to be the king who would succeed King Saul. As this scene unfolds, it has all the marks of a beauty pageant. When Samuel arrives and tells Jesse what God had in mind—that the next king of Israel will be chosen from among Jesse's sons—Jesse is understandably proud. One by one Jesse parades his sons before Samuel. He starts with the oldest son, Eliab, the most obvious candidate, the one with all the kingly qualities—tall, strong, handsome, wise, just the qualities one would want in a king. But God told Samuel, "Not him." So out comes the second son, Abinadab. He wasn't quite the measure of Eliab, but still would make a good king. Again God said, "No, not him." Here comes son #3, Shammah. Same thing again. One by one seven of Jesse's sons stand before Samuel, and every time Samuel thinks to himself, "This is the one; this is the guy that's got the right stuff." Only to hear God say, "Not him."

Finally in exasperation, Samuel turns to Jesse and says, "Have you got any more sons?" Jesse says, "Well, yes, there's one more, the youngest. He's out tending the sheep. But if you haven't liked any of the first seven, you're probably not going to like him either." But Samuel says, "Bring him to me." So here comes David, dirty and smelling of sheep, and God tells Samuel, "That's the one."

It's like God is going out of his way to let us know that God never chooses the one we might think is the most likely. I think God does that because God knows us. God knows that we would choose the one with the power, the one with all the good external qualities, the one from the right family with the right pedigree. But God never seems to choose that person. God never seems to choose the one you and I would choose. God/Jesus always come down on the side of the least likely, the neediest, the last, the least, the lost, the losers.

And it's happening again in today's gospel reading from Luke. Jesus has gone to the home of a Pharisee named Simon to eat a meal. Jesus is sitting at Simon's table, when

“a woman from the city, a sinner” comes in and stands behind Jesus, then kneels at Jesus’ feet. Do you have the picture in your mind? Jesus and Simon are sitting at the table the way respectable people do, and this woman—that everyone knows is a sinner—is standing, then kneeling, behind Jesus. In the scene there’s an insider—Simon the Pharisee—the one who is respected in the community; the one who when he speaks, people listen; one of the leaders of the synagogue; the one who does everything the right way, the respectable way. And there’s an outsider—this sinful woman—the one who had nothing to commend her. I know which one of them I would rather be seen with. Give me the Pharisee every time.

But Jesus never seems to choose the one that we would choose.

As they are seated there, the woman who is kneeling at Jesus’ feet, weeps silently, washing Jesus’ feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. She kissed his feet and anointed them with oil.

Well, all the respectable people who were watching this were about to burst. Jesus could almost hear their thoughts: “If he knew who this woman was and what kind of sinner she was, he wouldn’t have anything to do with her.” Without waiting for respectable Simon to put his thoughts into words, Jesus says to him, “Tell me this, Simon: if two people owed a debt—one owed a lot and the other owed a little—and the debts of both were forgiven, which one do you think would be more grateful.” Simon said, “Well, I guess the one who was forgiven more.” Jesus said, “Right. Look at this woman and all she has done to show her love. When I came into your house, you didn’t give me any water to wash my feet, but she hasn’t stopped washing my feet from the moment she arrived. When I came to your house, you gave me no kiss, but she has not stopped kissing my feet. You didn’t anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with her ointment. You, Simon, don’t think you need to be forgiven, so you don’t feel gratitude and love. She, on the other hand, knows that she needs to be forgiven so she is overflowing with gratitude and love when she receives forgiveness.” And with that, Jesus turned to the woman and said, “Your sins are forgiven.”

Yet again we see Jesus reaching out to and showing love for a sinner. Jesus always seems to embrace the least likely, the neediest, the last, the least, the lost.

Let me draw what I think are two lessons from what we have seen here today. The first lesson is this: if we would be followers of Jesus, we need to be welcoming of all people as Jesus was. Just as Jesus showed love to those who were looked down on by society so we, as Jesus’ disciples, are called to show love for the last, the least, the lost of our society. Just as Jesus embraced sinners, so we are to reach out in love to those that our society despises.

Here comes the hard part of this sermon. I think that if we are going to be true disciples of Jesus, we are called to see the homeless guy as our brother, the drug addict as our sister, the homosexual as our friend, the foreigner as our neighbor—all children of God. I’m not saying it’s easy to be a follower of Jesus, it just that I think this is what Jesus expects of us.

The other lesson to draw from this story is that if we are honest about ourselves, you and I are like that sinful woman in need of God’s forgiveness. We may prefer to think of ourselves as good, upstanding, worthy, deserving, respectable. But in truth we are sinners; we are without hope except in God’s forgiving mercy. The good news of the

gospel is that God always reaches out to and embraces the last, the least, the lost...and that's us.

Thanks be to our loving, inclusive God.✠