

## **We Are Called**

### **Scripture Reading: Isaiah 6:1-8**

Once upon a time... in a land far, far away, there was a man who made a life out of calling to people. All kinds of people from all kinds of walks of life. We don't know that much about this man even though he is very important to very many people. He's actually quite mysterious. We don't know for sure if he was tall or short. We don't know the color of his hair or eyes or skin – though based on where he was born, we can make some educated guesses. He was definitely not Anglo-saxon, as so many pictures of him suggest. But this man - some people say he was just a man – a very good teacher, maybe even a prophet. Some people say he was a man and God, all at the same time. But that's getting ahead of things. Some say he died and rose again three days later. But that's not the story for today.

In his own times, this man did a lot of walking and a lot of talking. Along dusty roads and winding narrow streets, in big cities like Jerusalem and small villages alike. He'd meet new people and share bread and olive oil and fish and wine and ask people good and hard questions. He listened to friends and strangers alike the way very young children listen to a story, mesmerized. He preached simple messages to people of all ages and classes. More than that, he healed people. He gave sight to the blind, he freed people who were captive to their demons, he helped people who were like him and people who were completely different – women, gentiles, lepers, the powerful and the powerless. And while he went, he told them about the love of God and the way to take care of one another. This is what he called them to do and to be.

When he walked and talked, he spoke to these followers in stories, not because they were too dumb to understand him if he spoke plainly, but because he knew something simple and true about us people – we never outgrow our love of stories. Telling and listening to stories is how we learn the most. He knew that stories transport us – to who we used to be and who we might be again. They take us outside of ourselves, our own contexts, our own heads. They let us be open like children...And even though this man lived long ago and far away, he is still showing up in stories today.

Once upon a time, there were a bunch of kids on a playground, playing the same game they played every day – they called it Survival. It was a rowdy, raucous, and sometimes even brutal game. It was a game that each person played for themselves – there were no teams, there was no collaboration. The fastest, the biggest, the strongest, or the meanest kids won every time. But they all kept playing because, well, that's just what they did at recess time. The teacher would open the door and they'd go running out into the playground and Survival would commence for the next hour or so. It got pretty ugly sometimes, but hey, that's just the way the game was played.

But this time, the man came in the form of a small child. He was new to the class, and on his very first day out at recess, he stepped right in the middle of the melee of Surviving. He spoke softly and told the other kids – well now wait a second, what about a different game? Their ears perked up. A little boy named Ben shushed his friends and they gathered closer on the sun-soaked blacktop to listen to the newcomer. He smiled and said, "It's a game that the slower kids, the weaker kids, and the smaller kids can play too". He was talking about a game called Abundance, where they worked together as a team and created a better recess time for all of them. The strong used their strength, and the weak were also powerful. The game was even more fun than Survival, and it helped them come together as one.

The new kid passed the ball to Ben, who grinned and began the game.

And for a time, the kids liked playing Abundance. They were excited about how it made them feel – connected, like they were one big amoeba of fun. Like it wasn't just about winning and losing. And the new kid, who was really the man in disguise, having told them all he had to tell them about how to play Abundance instead of Survival, left again. And for a time the new game continued.

But, before long, they began to forget. They forgot the new rules, which were a little complicated and harder to stick to. Glimpses of the old Survival crept back into their play. They began to argue about who was the best at Abundance, even though being the best was never really the point. Before they knew it, they had gone back to the old game, though a few kids remembered how things had been and how they might be again.

One evening soon after the new kid had left, Ben went home and was puzzling about the old game and the new game. He wanted to talk to his family about what had happened. But, at dinner, his dad, Marcus, was a bit distracted, for some strange things had been going on at work. His family pushed to learn what had happened, and this is the story he told...

Once upon a time, there was a new guy at the office. Boss's son, the rumors had it. (It was the Man in disguise again, of course). He was pretty quiet the first few days, just soaking it all in. Clearly fresh meat in the corporate world, totally lost about things like the bottom line and the importance of always cutting back spending and increasing profit margins. He started asking strange questions around the water cooler. Questions about how much the company could give away. Questions about why the employees weren't standing up for each other like brothers and sisters, why they weren't carrying each other's burdens the extra mile, and so on. What if we just... did business differently? He asked with a naiveté that was charming, if dangerous.

A few of this new guy's colleagues, including this Marcus, actually really liked him. They thought he was a good man, if a little innocent to the ways of the working world. They tried to help him stay in line – boss's son or not, he'd lose his job if corporate heard these ideas.

They warned him. "Cut it out, man, you can't talk like that here." "Dude, they will *crucify* you if you go into the boardroom talking like that."

But the man wasn't quiet and he kept speaking out, telling more and more people – from the janitors to the board of trustees – that things could be different. He even called Marcus at home one night, gently inviting him in – "Just think about it, okay? Imagine how different it could be if people and relationships were more important than money! We could tell that story instead!" His excitement was hard to ignore. That they could have their business and care for one another – all of each other, from the least to the most. What an idea. Last Marcus had seen, though, the new guy was headed into the board room, and they all knew that he wasn't long for this corporate world.

The family sat over their dinner, pondering the story and pushing peas around their plates. What could it mean? The new kid on the playground, the quiet rebellions of board rooms. Did it add up? Was it important?

After a restless night's sleep, the next morning, the little boy's mother – Julia - carried the story with her to the non-profit she helped to run. This group didn't have a lot of resources but they cared a lot about their work - they tried to keep kids from the other side of town in school and off drugs. None of the staff lived in the neighborhood they served, but every week day they gathered behind the locked office door to strategize and write grants and examine their evaluation data and update their website.

It was a good group with good ideas but they found themselves getting tired, getting frustrated. When Julia arrived to work that day, she heard some of the familiar complaints about repeat clients

at their non-profit. Can't these people get their kids under control? Don't they want a better life for their kids than what they've got? Maybe they spend some time in jail and figure out how tough they aren't.

Julia sighed, knowing that her colleagues were bright, ambitious people, just getting worn down by the repetition and the need. She heard the stories of the man in disguise echoing around in her head. Notes of turning the other cheek, gentle reminders to resist the urge to throw the first stone.

Just then, Julia's reverie was broken by a sharp knock on the door – a young woman in a dirty coat with unkempt hair. She shouted through the locked glass door. "I just need to get something to eat! I heard you help people." Her hands shook and her eyes were glassy. The staff looked at one another hesitantly – they weren't a drop-in center, this went against all their protocol.

Julia shrugged and went to the door, and saw that the girl got the help she needed.

Later, when the staff regathered for an end of day meeting, Julia tentatively told the stories her son and her husband had shared over dinner. She prompted her colleagues and friends to share their stories too, stories of similar encounters with similar voices. Voices suggesting new ideas and strange things. Voices that were all echoes of the very same thing – this one man from long ago and far away calling to them. One particularly shy colleague spoke up about a story of someone new coming to her little home church.

And this is the story she told...

Once upon a time, a stranger came to worship. They sat in the middle towards the back. They didn't know the words to the hymns or when to stand or sit, but they muddled through worship. People greeted the stranger during the passing of the peace. They were welcoming on a surface level. People were polite. They usually are. But when the stranger came back the next week and the next, it was just the same – politeness, a quick greeting, a glib "how are you?", before turning to more familiar faces. But they did not come to know this person, they did not treat them like what they were – long lost family, not a stranger but a sibling brought back home, to be celebrated and loved. Eventually the stranger went away. A few people noticed the absence. Nobody could remember their name.

The small office of the non-profit went quiet. Each pondering their clients by name and by who they really are.

The next Sunday, this family – Ben, Marcus, and Julia– they went to church. They sat near friends, greeted warmly like family. They enjoyed the music of the organ, the enthusiasm of the choir, the preacher's attempts at a gentle call to action.

After worship, they joined the snack line along with everybody else, but then Ben noticed a newcomer standing off to one side, unsure of how to proceed. The little boy didn't shrug and run off with his friends as he might have weeks before. The stranger's presence was calling him.

Ben stared at the newcomer for a moment and thought about the new game of Abundance and how much more fun it had been than the game of Surviving. He started walking towards the stranger.

Marcus noticed, and thought about the new guy at the office. He thought about how, really, his ideas hadn't been so far out of line, and that he wished he'd stood up for the new guy when the hammer was dropped by the board. He followed his son towards the stranger.

And Julia watched them both, remembering the stories told at her office. Remembering the lost stranger. And she followed her son as well.

Inviting the stranger to sit with them around the table over coffee and cookies, they made a simple request –

Tell us your story.

And the man from a long time ago and far away began to speak again.

Amen.

---

Sermon preached by Reverend Laurie Lyter Bright at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin  
Livestreamed on November 15, 2020