

“Good Enough”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
3rd Sunday after the Epiphany – 25 January 2009
Mark 1:16-20

Life was getting rough in the gigantic ballroom of the Galt House Hotel, on the banks of the Ohio River in downtown Louisville. Over 100 adolescents from across the Commonwealth of Kentucky were close to exhaustion, after rehearsing 10 hours a day for three straight days. We were the Kentucky All-State Symphonic Band, and our concert was scheduled for tomorrow night.

Months before, each of us had spent an entire day waiting to audition in front of three anonymous judges hidden behind screens; an entire day of sizing up the competition and showing off in an effort to psyche out potential rivals. That day came down to five sweaty minutes, five minutes when unsteady nerves could disturb the meticulously prepared pieces; five minutes that ended with sight reading, where a piece of music you’d never seen before would be placed on the stand, and after thirty seconds’ scrutiny, you had to play, and you’d better get it right. People who had been making music since the age of three found themselves so flustered during the sight reading portion that they actually forget how to read notes and rhythms.

The pressure was intense, but after the audition finally came and went, the day was far from over. It lingered, like a foul stench, until every instrumentalist auditioned, and then once everyone was done, we waited a bit longer, as the results were tabulated, until finally with a flourish someone began posting plain pieces of paper on the walls, paper covered with names and numbers.

You looked at the top of the page first, full of hope, and as your eyes descended the page toward that terrible thick black line that demarcated those who were in and those were out, the anxiety built exponentially. My name was next to number seven; seventh out of fifteen accepted; fifteen out of over 100 trumpeters who auditioned. I was overjoyed, but that was another day, months before the overheated ballroom in a gaudy hotel, nursing bruised, chapped lips from blowing through a trumpet hour after hour all week long.

I was no longer overjoyed. I wasn't even underjoyed. I had none: nada, zilch, zip, the big goose egg on the joy-o-meter, all because a single lick. For the uninitiated, a lick in musical slang refers to a passage, sometimes only a few measures in length. This was a particularly tough lick for me. I couldn't quite figure out why, since I'd played much more difficult stuff. It was frustrating.

After several attempts, the martinet running the show from the podium, also known as the conductor, a rather impatient, egotistical twerp, stopped everything, pointed his bony finger at me, and shouted, "If you can't play it, don't ruin it for everybody else. Just go through the motions and pretend. You seem to be pretty good at that anyway." (You really shouldn't be mean to people, because you never know when they might grow up to be a priest and stick you in one of their sermons.) Hundreds of eyes stared at me; mine were busy noticing how ugly the carpet was.

I've never forgotten that moment, which is sort of silly, I suppose, but it represents to me a sort of iconic expression of a common message that we've all received off and on through life: you're not good enough. Those of us chosen last at the playground got that message loud and clear. Those of us passed over for promotion;

those of us who received the politely-worded formulaic rejection letter; those of us got stood up for a date or got given an F on a term paper we worked hard on, those of us got much worse: we all repeatedly get the message that we're just not good enough.

Even our entertainment, which is supposed to distract us and give us some escape from it all, seems geared toward emphasizing our inadequacy. A common advertising tactic is to exploit our sense of being unfulfilled, so that we will consume whatever product is being sold that can purportedly change that. Don't feel man enough? Buy yourself a big truck that can haul a dead elephant but still manage to stop on a dime right before it goes over the cliff. Don't feel feminine enough? Buy this fragrance. Try on this fabric. Feel disconnected? Well, have we got a deal for you! Pick up this gizmo that'll fit in your pocket and make sure that you're always plugged in to your e-mail and voice mail and text messages and web alerts.

Of course, there's nothing new under the sun. Ever since when, people have gotten that message, and the disciples chosen by Jesus were no different. Just look at them: fishermen! An honorable enough profession, but not the first choice of many; it was hard, dangerous work – the Sea of Galilee wasn't exactly a millpond. These men might have once had other aspirations, but for whatever reason, they couldn't make the grade, and their education was ended, usually before their teens, and they were apprenticed to whatever job was available that suited their innate abilities.

Then here comes this man, fresh from the desert. People probably knew who he was. Jesus was a local, from down in Nazareth, and had recently gotten baptized by John in the Jordan – just in the nick of time, too, because shortly afterwards John was arrested for having a big mouth. And there was something about him; perhaps an aura of

authority from his time in the wilderness. Whatever the case, he called to them, and they followed. And maybe it was because somebody finally, after all those years, gave them a different message: you are good enough.

No, you're not the brightest or the strongest or the best in any category that matters to anybody, but follow me anyway, just because I choose you; just because you know you want to go. You know that you want to do something with your life that has great meaning; you're looking to fulfill a high purpose, and long since when, you've figured out that fishing – fine as it is – simply isn't enough. So follow me.

And they did.

Mark tells it without much elaboration, no hint of their motive or any promise of reward given. They just left, dropped everything, abandoned their families and livelihoods and followed this man who we have no evidence to suggest they had ever even met. And I think it was because his invitation to follow him was the first time in a long time, maybe the first time ever, that someone sight unseen said to them, you are good enough.

Plenty of people in our world need that message. Just think of the ideas, attitudes, and words floating around out there. “You old people! Youth is king! Give it up and go play your golf. We're ready to take the reins. You young people: ignorant, impulsive little savages! Good luck with those idealistic dreams of yours. You disabled folk, Good Lord, you already get the parking spaces closest to the door. What else do you want? You poor people, shame on your laziness and lack of ambition. You rich, obsessed by your luxurious gluttony. Choke on it! You righteous, so hypocritically proud of your piety.” None of us are good enough.

And that's the God's honest truth, if we measure "good enough" by the standards of this world. But Jesus has something else in mind. He never had much time for the conventional norms. He loves us just the way we are, which isn't to say we don't have a little work to do, but nevertheless, he meets us and accepts us just as are. Jesus doesn't measure your adequacy by your utility. Jesus doesn't ascribe worth in the same way we do. Jesus sees in each of us an intrinsic value, which cannot be eroded by market forces, and everyone – everyone – has a gift to give in return; a gift to give with gratitude for the grace God offers.

We want to give, when a gift is given to us. It's a natural response. More than human; it's a reflection of who we are as creatures created in the image of God. But all too often we think we have nothing worthy to give, so we refuse the gift God is trying to give to us. We sometimes even resent the gift. Our shame and guilt at our own sense of inadequacy makes us feel as if we are unworthy, unable either to receive or return the gift. What nonsense!

Every person in this room has a gift to give, young and old, rich and poor. Jesus didn't pick fishermen for their eloquence, or their knowledge, or their money. Fishermen were usually on the lower end of the economic totem pole; they were most likely illiterate. Jesus picked them because they were available and willing, and because Jesus saw something in them that went beyond what the world usually sees in a person.

Maybe you can't teach Sunday School. It's a big commitment, very intimidating. But could you pray for a child, that he or she might grow strong in the faith, might be kept safe from danger, and always aware of God's love. Of course, you can, and don't

think for a moment that a simple prayer makes a negligible difference, because prayer can move mountains, so says Jesus.

Maybe you don't have much money. Who cares? OK, maybe Fred cares, but really he doesn't, because everybody knows that what we are about here is worship of God. Why? Because God deserves it, because we need to worship God. We are hard-wired to praise the Creator who gives us life. So show up. What you put in the plate is useful, but secondary to the primary purpose of this community, which is to glorify God, not for what He does for us, but simply because He's God, and He is good.

Maybe you're not very bright, or well educated, or maybe you just regard yourself as such. Since when did bright and well educated have anything to do with a kind word or gesture, a timely thoughtful phone call or note? It's not that those blessed with exceptional abilities, assets, and intelligence, have no role to play. Indeed, as scripture says, to those who have, more will be given, not for their own aggrandizement, but to the glory of God and for the completion of God's purposes. But understand that Jesus, who called the fishermen, the guys didn't make the grade, the fellows that had to settle for something less in life, that same Jesus calls each and every one of us to the grand adventure of ministry. Because of all of things Jesus ever said, I challenge you to find for me in scripture even the merest hint of the horrible phrase, "You aren't good enough," passing his lips.

You are. You are good enough. Not because you're so special or deserving or accomplished, but because you are a child of God, and God has chosen you. We need not apply or qualify or audition, and there will be licks in life – musical and otherwise – that

we simply cannot play. All we need do is accept and follow. Think you've got that in you? Amen.