

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

16th Sunday after Pentecost

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September 28, 2014

Text: Mark 1:16-20

Title: “Serving from the Heart: Individuality”

I am an INTJ. What are you? Anybody? The initials come from the Meyers Briggs personality test based on the work of Dr. Carl Jung, whose work on psychological types led to a test that could help people learn more about themselves by understanding four areas:

First, from what source do people gain energy: do you receive energy by being with groups of people or do you need time alone in order to replenish your inner strength. If by being in groups of people, it's a characteristic of Extroversion (E). If by being alone you gain energy then a person leans toward Introversion (I).

Second: Information. Do you prefer to focus on the basic information you take in or do you prefer to interpret and add meaning? This is called Sensing (S) or Intuition (N).

Third: Decisions. When making decisions, do you prefer to first look at logic and consistency or first look at the people and special circumstances? This is called Thinking (T) or Feeling (F).

Finally: Structure. In dealing with the outside world, do you prefer to get things decided or do you prefer to stay open to new information and options? This is called Judging (J) or Perceiving (P). Judging, by the way, is not about being judgmental, but rather about a person's preference for clarity in making decisions.

The test helps to determine a person's profile using the designated letters. And mine—as I said—are INTJ: introversion, intuition, thinking, and judging.

The first time I took the test I'm not sure I completely understood the implications, but I've taken the test several times over the years, and the results are always the same at least in one area: I am an introvert. It's just a fact. At some point, it began to dawn on me why it is that nearly every Sunday I go home and have to take an afternoon nap. I'm an extreme introvert who works with groups of people, but have learned to compensate by being in front of people week after week, but it's still never completely comfortable for me because of my introversion.

The classes studying spiritual gifts are doing a very basic, modified version of this test, so if you haven't taken it before, you'll have an opportunity to do so if you're in a class. The beautiful thing about this is that it affirms that God has created us in ways that make us complex creatures. The challenging thing about this, however, is that sometimes those complexities that make us different from one another can also result in conflicts. It's not always about who is right and who is wrong. Sometimes it's simply about being different from one another. Knowing that, what does serving from the heart have to do with such differences? And how can God use us—different though we are—to accomplish God's purposes in building God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven?

Lynn and I have been to Israel twice. Different places brought tears to my eyes as I thought about Jesus who walked that land. On the first trip when we were in the Galilee region, we stayed at a hotel on the shore of Lake Genessaret, also known as the Sea of Galilee. One moonlit night, we walked to the lake from our hotel and took a stroll along the shore. It's not a Lake Charlevoix or Michigan or Huron sands but rather the shoreline is gravelly. Your feet crunch in the pebbles with each step. As we walked, crunching along with the rhythm of the waves gently rolling to shore, I thought about this story from the Gospel According to Mark, this story in which Jesus walked that same shoreline crunching in the pebbles just like we were and for some reason, I felt my eyes fill just a bit. I guess it was because it was here that Jesus called his first followers, right? On this very shore! And I was given the gift of being there.

But then maybe there was more to it than that. Maybe it was the recognition that Jesus called unlikely people to follow him. Notice he wasn't walking in the library of the rabbinical school to call his first followers. Nor was he in the halls of the great Herodian palace seeking his followers in the place of great power and wealth. He was walking outside on the shore of a lake when he comes to a couple of fisherman throwing nets into the water. Fisherman! Really, Jesus, you're going to call fisherman to change the world? Fisherman!? To the first two—Simon and his brother, Andrew—he says, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And they do it! Drop everything and go!

Now there are six feet crunching in the pebbles down the beach, the waves gently rolling onto shore when they come upon another couple of fisherman: James and John. Apparently they're a bit different than Simon and Andrew because they're part of a company with hired hands--a small business perhaps owned by Zebedee, their father. They were sitting in their boats, checking and repairing the nets that gave them their livelihood. The six feet stop their crunching and Jesus calls them, too. Like Simon and Andrew, they go! Now there are 10 feet crunching as they walk along the shore of this beautiful lake in Galilee.

A little while later, in chapter 2 of the Gospel According to Mark, Jesus is crunching along that same shore again, and he comes upon Levi at a tax booth. He's a tax collector. His work has nothing to do with fishing except the tax he collects on those who do the catching. Jesus chats with him, too. “Follow me,” he says. And Levi does.

These accounts are so sparse that we don't know if any of these men knew Jesus before he called them. It might make it easier to believe if we were told they heard Jesus preaching to turn their lives around toward God because God's kingdom is near and you don't want to miss the good gift. If they went to one of Jesus' revivals and were inspired, it might make more sense that they'd leave everything at the drop of a hat and follow him. We don't know if the men knew each other either. We can surmise that may have been the case given four of them were fisherman, and it's reasonable to expect that the fisherman on the lake all knew each other. Also, given Levi was a tax collector with a booth on or near the lake, it makes sense that they might have known him too. So if one of them fell for Jesus and decided to follow it's more plausible that the others might follow that first person's lead. But we don't know from the account in Mark if any of these connections were made. All we know is that there was something compelling about Jesus, compelling enough that these people left what they were doing with their lives and joined him on his mission to tell the world that God's kingdom is present and alive and it's good news. More than that, Jesus came to demonstrate that fact with his healing and his teaching and his mercy and feeding and forgiving and loving. That's what they were signing up for when these very different individuals left everything and followed him.

Would you? Would I? I expect that while most of us might admire the disciples for having done what they did, few of us would do what they did, at least in the manner in which we read in Mark. What might be so compelling that you would leave everything and venture out in quest of, and service to,

something new? If you were convinced God was calling you, to what would that call need to be in order for you to drop everything and go? It would have to be very compelling wouldn't it to give up the security of what you know?

Each week I have lunch with other UM pastors in the area. We meet for mutual support and prayer. Two weeks ago, in the midst of our conversation, Len Clevenger, the pastor of Grace UMC in Bay City, shared his understanding of folks who come for an hour a week, leave and go on with their lives without even thinking about their spiritual lives outside the church during the day to day chores of living. Len is a second career pastor who worked for Dow Chemical for 30 years as a chemical engineer when God called him to parish ministry. He said, "You know I get it. I was like that for 30 years or more as a member of the church. I positioned myself in the sanctuary for the fastest exit after worship was over, gave me one hour a week, but that was it." (By the way, I did ask his permission to share his story.)

I asked him, "So Len, what changed for you? What was it that caused you to take the next step in deepening your spiritual life?"

He said, "I attended the funeral of a friend. Died of cancer. Too young. Way too young. The pastor during the service said that he'd been visiting my friend and he asked him, 'So how are you feeling about all of this?' Len's friend told the pastor, 'Either way I win.' The pastor asked him, 'What do you mean, Either way I win?' Well, if the surgery is successful, I get to spend more years with my family and that will be great. But if it isn't, I get to be with Jesus. So either way, I win."

Len finished the story by saying, "I wanted to have that kind of faith! And the one hour a week rush out the door after worship didn't provide that." So he took steps toward deepening his walk with God by participating in an Emmaus Walk which involves a weekend away to concentrate on one's spiritual life. He also signed up for Disciple Bible Study which is a small group, committed study of the entire Bible. And through that intentional walk, he found what he was looking for: a joyful, deep confidence in God's love of him and God's ability to provide for him through the grace of Jesus Christ.

For those who think that Jesus only called people to change their lives when they could hear the crunch of his sandals on the shore of Lake Genessaret, I've got news for you: God is still calling individuals to follow. Just as God called Moses, a guy who rebuffed God's call initially claiming he couldn't speak well; just as God called Jeremiah, a teenager who resisted God because he was too young; just as God called Abraham--an old man--to follow God's lead; just as God called David, a shepherd kid; just as God called Noah, a boat builder; just as God called fishermen and tax collectors; just as God called Paul, a rabid anti-Christian; just as God called Stephen, a guy who waited tables; just as God called Martin Luther King Jr., a man who just wanted to be a Baptist pastor like his father before him; just as God called our own Pastor Penny at an age that doesn't seem to make a lot of sense; just as God called all these different individuals into life-giving, life-changing ministry, so God can call you. God uses our diversity as individuals for God's good purpose.

As you ponder God's call and claim on your own life, I wonder if there is someone here who has sensed a compelling call to parish ministry as a pastor? I wonder if anyone of you have, like Dan Gonder or Joy Barret or Ray Wightman or my friend, Len Clevenger or our friend Penny Parkin considered the possibility that God might be calling you to take the first step toward becoming a pastor? If so, I'd like to invite you to come. The ushers will come forward and receive your offerings if you choose to bring one. And as you bring your offering, you will notice a prayer quilt. Harlen Holiday is now at home and on hospice as he makes the transition from this life to the next. You are invited to come, tie a knot as you pray for Harlen, and make your offering. If you'd rather not come forward, someone will be wandering

the sanctuary with an offering plate ready to receive your offering if you'd like to make one, And if you are sensing the possibility that God may be calling you to ministry--it doesn't have to be as a parish pastor, but some kind of ministry that would be new—and perhaps frightening--to you, I invite you to come to the rail and pray, and I will come and pray with you.

It's true that we are complex individuals. In many ways we are very different from one another and have been given unique individual qualities by God. But it's also true that God who created us is One, and when we choose to follow Jesus, the Spirit has the power to use our differences to share God's mercy, healing, feeding, forgiveness and love.