“Untimely born” is a euphemism: a phrase meant to cover up a grisly reality. Translators chose this phrase to protect our sensibilities. Paul’s real language is more earthy. The Greek word Paul uses literally means, “abortion” or “miscarriage.” Paul is saying that there is nothing easy about his acceptance of the Gospel, nothing smooth about his path to discipleship. Paul, in other words, is not a legitimate son of the gospel, not even an illegitimate heir. He is a twisted, broken wreck of a human being whom Jesus calls to spread the Gospel.

If you grimace at the earthiness of these words, remember that Paul, as Saul of Tarsus, vigorously persecuted the Christian church. Saul was a religious bounty hunter; he rounded Christians up for execution. It was Saul who held the cloaks of the mob as they stoned Stephen to death. “But by the grace of God,” Paul writes, “I am what I am.” Paul is an apostle, not by his own merits, but by the power of the living Lord who called out to him on the Damascus Road, who plucked him out of his hate-filled life and transported him into the light of the gospel. Paul is another unlikely apostle!

Then there is the prophet, Isaiah. Isaiah is in the temple when he receives a vision. He sees God, enthroned on high, a figure so immense that the hem of God’s robe touches the temple walls. Isaiah sees angels soaring on their wings around the throne of God. The walls shake with their voices, and the cavernous hall is filled with smoke.

Isaiah is terrified. He shrinks back into a corner, cowering behind a pillar. “Woe is me!” he says to himself. “I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” An angel approaches Isaiah, holding in a pair of tongs a live coal from the sacrificial fire. The angel touches it to Isaiah’s mouth and tells him his sins are blotted out. Then, Isaiah hears the voice of the Lord: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” “Here am I,” the newly minted prophet cries out, surprised that the voice has come from him. “Send me!” (Isaiah 6:1-8).

A man of unclean lips, dwelling among a people of unclean lips. Clearly Isaiah considers himself a huge sinner and a most unlikely candidate for the Lord’s work. Yet, God does not choose the high priest or the king to deliver the sacred message; God chooses Isaiah, the sinner! It is to this unlikely candidate that the Lord gives the holy words to speak to Israel. The Scriptures are replete with stories of men and women who are just as sinful and equally undeserving, and yet they are the ones whom God calls.

Jesus’ disciples are also unlikely candidates. They are ordinary men, not rich or powerful, not the movers and shakers, not the honored professionals of their world, but blue-collar laborers. None of them has much education. Yet, these are the men Jesus invites to join him on a fishing expedition, fishing for the hearts and souls of people. If Jesus asked us to review the resumes of those first disciples, it would be a very sad and strange list:

* Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and given to fits of rage.
* Andrew and Philip have absolutely no qualities of leadership.
* The brothers, James and John, place personal interest above company loyalty.
* Thomas demonstrates a skeptical, questioning attitude that undermines morale.
* Matthew is a tax collector who collaborates with the Romans, using some questionable ethical business tactics.
* James, son of Alphaeus, and Thaddeus have radical political leanings.
* Judas Iscariot, the group’s treasurer, is in it for the glory, power, and prestige.

Had Jesus set out to launch a smoothly functioning global nonprofit, he surely could have picked better men than these. But Jesus did not set out to create an organization. He came into the world, as his cousin John said, “as a witness to testify to the light” (John 1:6). Those who saw divine light reflected in Jesus’ face followed him. By the power of the Holy Spirit, those feeble disciples did the most astounding things, amazing even themselves.

The fact is, God always calls unlikely people.Abraham is an old man when God promises him a son; and his wife, Sarah, openly laughs at God’s promise. Moses is a murderer, on the lam, working odd jobs herding sheep when God calls him to lead God’s people to freedom. Rahab is a temple prostitute from a foreign nation, who saves Joshua’s men from their enemies. Samuel is a boy so dull that God must call him three times before he recognizes God’s voice. David is a mighty king and a mighty sinner. He seduces Bathsheba, then has her husband killed so he can marry her. But his repentance is real, and he never stops loving the Lord. Ruth is a widow from a foreign country, a worshiper of other gods. Out of love for her mother-in-law, she follows her to Israel, finds a husband and becomes Jesus’ ancestor. Jeremiah responds to God’s call with hesitation, saying, “I cannot speak, I am only a boy” (Jeremiah 1:6). God makes up the talent deficit. John the Baptizer is a wild man of the wilderness given to outbursts of irrational anger. Zacchaeus is a tax collector: a man so despised that when Jesus visits his house, the people complain. Jesus responds, “the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:9).

Every one of them is an unlikely disciple. Yet these are the people God calls, because there is only one requirement for discipleship: a willingness to submit to God’s call. You do not have to be smart, strong, healthy, or even particularly religious. All you need to do is listen when God calls, and then get up and do what is needed. You do not even need to respond immediately. The Bible is full of people like Jonah, who when they hear God calling, run off in the opposite direction. Yet, one thing you must admit about God’s call is that it is persistent. God will keep calling until finally we cease our resistance and submit.

There is so much in us that tries to block God’s call. There is so much pride, so much determination to seek glory for ourselves. There are so many voices in the world calling us to ungodly things. It is only when we can heave a great sigh, like Paul, and turn ourselves over to God, that we can say, with him, “But by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Corinthians 15:10). Only then can we take those first hesitant steps in the direction of our calling.

We are all unlikely candidates for discipleship. There are no super-Christians, only ordinary people, hesitant in their faith, sometimes wavering in their commitment, oftentimes difficult to live with. As a collective group, we are sinful, hypocritical, stingy, short-tempered, insecure; in short, no different from any other gathering of human beings on this globe. Yet haven’t we all, somewhere, sometime, heard something of God’s call in our lives? Each time we reach such a vocational crossroads, we have a choice. We can say yes to God’s call, however hesitantly, or we can go our own way. “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” demands the voice of God. Isaiah says, “Here am I, send me.” What say *you*?

Prayer: God of love, source of mercy and compassion, weave your dream for the world into the fabric of our lives. Remove the scales from our eyes and lift the indifference from our hearts, so that we may see your vision: a new reign of justice and compassion that renews the earth. Transform our lives, so that we may accomplish your purpose. Anoint us with your spirit of love that we might bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim release to the captive. Give us a new urgency and a new commitment to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, and visit the lonely. Help us to reach out to those whom no one else will touch, to accept the unacceptable, to embrace the enemy. Surround us with your love, fill us with your grace, and strengthen us for your service. Empower us to respond to the call of Jesus – to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses, and to follow. Make us your disciples. Amen.

**Who You Gonna Call?**

Sunday, February 6, 2022 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Born into wealth and privilege, he was a notorious party animal who lived a life of selfish ease. Much to the dismay of his mother, an upstanding Christian, he frequented the dives of the city. He kept company with disreputable characters. He had a son with his live-in girlfriend and made no move to marry her. He felt troubled by the emptiness of his life. Then, this entitled young man had a change of heart. One day he found himself sitting in the garden of the family estate, a Bible in his hands. The young man opened the Bible and read these words from Romans 13: “Let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (vv. 13-14).

Years later, the man wrote about how he felt that day: “Instantly, it was as if the light of peace was poured into my heart, and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.” Not long after, this self-indulgent young man surprised his friends by training for the priesthood. Ultimately, he became a priest, and then a bishop, and is now called “Saint” in many Christian traditions. His name was Augustine, and he lived in the fourth century. He was as unlikely a candidate for sainthood as any you will find.

God issued many other unlikely calls. Scan the pages of the Bible and you will find all sorts of people whom God’s Spirit touched; people who hear God calling and respond. Such is the case for the man who wrote today’s Scripture lesson. His name is Paul. In First Corinthians 15, Paul rolls the credits for his Christian faith. It reads like the end of a movie. The final scene is played out, telling the story of Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus, beginning with these words: “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day.”

Then the names begin to scroll: “[Jesus] appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters.…Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.” It is only after this great litany of the faithful that Paul dares to list his own name: “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.”