

Last week, when we looked at Simon Peter's call story as the first apostle, when Jesus invited him to push out into the deep water, we didn't know we'd be faced with our own deep water this week. As many of you experienced, deep water can wreck havoc on our lives -- washed out cattle gates, uprooted trees, flooded streets, homes and businesses. Dried-up creeks become roaring rapids. Jesus never said it was going to be easy to go into the deep.

But, the deep water is living water that keeps us growing and flourishing. Right before this passage, Jesus chooses the other eleven apostles to help him in his ministry. He gathers them all together when a large crowd comes to hear them preach and to be healed.

Jesus delivers a sermon that is similar to the one he delivered in his home church, that we looked at two weeks ago. In that sermon, he said he was called to bring the good news to the poor, the imprisoned, the sick, and the oppressed. In this sermon, Jesus says the same thing, yet he uses a few different words to describe the needy: the poor, the hungry, the grieving, and the rejected. Jesus teaches that God values and responds to those whom the world treats as trash, so the apostles are called to do the same. As followers of Christ, we are all called to love and show mercy as Christ did, to all people.

As the new apostles are gathered together, Jesus gives them their marching orders. He tells them bluntly that following Christ won't be easy. Being a disciple is more than a simple "follow me" and they'll live happily ever after. He assures them they will be blessed, but there is a cost to

discipleship. They will be persecuted and history shows that to be true. All of the disciples were martyred, except for one, John, who was exiled. Jesus tells them that God is turning the world upside down, and to be a part of that will require a sacrifice.

The same is expected for us. If we choose to follow Christ, we aren't blessed or happy because we said "yes." We receive God's blessing when we put in the work and sacrifice for the poor and the suffering. As Anne Lamott put it: "If you don't take care of the poor, you're doomed. Jesus doesn't even know what to do with you. If you don't know where to get started, feed the poor."¹

It's never easy pushing out into the deep; we will always experience trials and conflicts with others who choose not to follow the call of Christ. We look to the prophet Jeremiah for guidance: "Blessed are those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence" (Jeremiah 17:7). When the trials come, we put our trust in the LORD. We do not put our trust in only humans. We rely on the strength of the LORD, not human strength.

[SHOW PHOTO by Frank Colosi]

Jeremiah continues in the 17th chapter: When we put our trust in the LORD, we are "like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they never stop producing fruit" (Jer.17:8). When we are trees, our roots reach deep into the living water that gets us through the hard times.

When we put our trust into mere humans, Jeremiah tells us that we are like

¹ Lecture, Balboa Theatre, November 13, 2018.

stunted shrubs in the desert, with no hope for the future. We will live in the barren wilderness, in an uninhabited salty land” (v.6). When we don’t put our trust in the LORD, we will never make it through the trials. We will never grow. Our roots aren’t tapped into the living water, so we stay in the wilderness, alone, stunted and barren.

Luke says that the poor, the hungry, the mourning, and the rejected are blessed because they put their trust in the LORD. They cannot put their trust in anything else because everyone and everything else has failed them. People have failed them, society has failed them, the system has failed them. They are trees whose roots reach deep into God’s living water because they know it is only God whom they can rely on.

[This photo was taken this week by Frank Colosi, and it really resonated with me.]

Are you a shrub or a tree? It depends on the day, right? Psalm 1 gives us hope. Let me read this in *The Message* translation, you’re going to love this: “How well God must like you – you don’t hang out at Sin Saloon, you don’t slink along Dead-End Road, you don’t go to Smart-Mouth College. Instead you thrill to God’s Word, you chew on Scripture day and night. You’re a tree replanted in Eden, bearing fresh fruit every month, never dropping a leaf, always in blossom.” The *Message* translation says we’re replanted, not just planted.

Sometimes we think we’ve always been a desert shrub, so nothing is ever going to change that. We have tried to change, but a shrub is a shrub. We’re all desert shrubs

in the beginning; we all put our trust in other people and things, but eventually we learn that we can only rely on God. We can choose to be re-planted by the river so that our roots can reach into the living water.

To be a follower of Christ, we must be a tree. We have to put our trust in the LORD, if we ever hope to make it through our trials. We will never be able to continue our call to serve the poor and the suffering, if we don’t tap into the living, sustaining water. We can put our trust in the church, in your pastor, in your spouse, your family, your friends, and although all of these may have good intentions to help you, they will all let you down eventually.

Only God can make you into this tree. Stay close to your water source. Trust it. Let your roots grow deep into God’s living water, and you will flourish. You will become the strong tree that God has called you to be. Amen.