

Seeing the Potential in People Luke 5

In the very beginning of His public ministry, Jesus worked alone. Certainly, there were those who spent more time with Him than others, but He did not immediately identify anyone to be His helper or His student.

In those days, graduate school was run entirely differently from what it is today. Back then, you would attach yourself to someone from whom you wanted to learn. You paid for the privilege. The teacher was then obligated to teach you. But the teacher did not sit you down in a classroom, but rather you worked with the teacher as a helper, plus received lectures and participated in discussions on a semi-regular basis. For example, John the Baptist had disciples, learners, who are mentioned in John 1:35 – 36, 3:25 – 26, and Matthew 9:14 – 17. Here in Luke 5, Jesus will pick up His first disciples and continue touring Galilee, speaking in synagogues as well as in open spaces such as could accommodate a crowd.

So, let's get right into the story in Luke 5. The general feel of the chapter, to me, illustrates how Jesus saw the best in people, and communicated that observation. In our own lives, we come in contact with lots of people. How we see them largely determines the nature of our future relationship. Jesus built up and enabled the faithful. Here's the first scene (1 – 11):

So it was, as the multitude pressed about Him to hear the word of God, that He stood by the Lake of Gennesaret [Sea of Galilee], and saw two boats standing by the lake; but the fishermen had gone from them and were washing their nets. Then He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little from the land. And He sat down and taught the multitudes from the boat. When He had stopped speaking, He said to Simon, "Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch."

But Simon answered and said to Him, "Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net." And when they had done this, they caught a great number of fish, and their net was breaking. So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!"

For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish which they had taken; and so also were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men." So when they had brought their boats to land, they forsook all and followed Him.

Jesus did not wait for potential disciples to request to join His entourage. He did not ease into it or give them time to organize this new direction in their lives. He asked; they responded. And, just so we do not think that every time Jesus said, "Follow Me," the person responded positively, Luke 9 contains three examples of people who declined.

Waiting for people to act on their own is rarely successful. Challenging people with an opportunity sorts the positive thinkers from the negative thinkers. Those with Biblical faith take risks because they trust that God will make things work out, probably not with health and wealth, but with peace and joy. The clergy mentality prevents people from taking action because they expect the organization to do all the heavy lifting.

Notice that Jesus did not recruit from among the disciples of the many rabbis, graduate students in theology. Rather, Jesus picked fairly ordinary people. As the story unfolds, we will find that these ordinary, working people had a fair amount of faith, which Jesus could see. But, as we also can see as the story unfolds, they were not titans of faith, either. They had their doubts and hangups like everyone else. As with my other observations, this appears to be a characteristic of Jesus that we might want to try, challenging ordinary but at least marginally faithful people to take a chance on God.

Conventional churches tend to overlook those on the fringes of society, as well as those who have not studied extensively in one or more conventional religious graduate schools. Jesus, on the other hand, saw their fledgling faith as a diamond in the rough. Conventional churches are not likely to change, just like the Sadducees and Pharisees. Disrupting mainstream religion is not likely to produce positive results.

And, worldly talents are still useful. The vast majority of those in the employ of various churches generally would not be able to make a decent living anywhere but within their denomination. Jesus' disciples had skills that enabled the group to survive on many occasions. They could find their own food. They understood how to live on the cheap. That's a useful profile today, as well. If we are looking for theologians to lead, they become a big part of the overhead. Those with worldly skills are much better with survival and asset management.

We are just beginning in the story of Jesus' earthly ministry, but we have a pretty good understanding of how it will go. The disciples will have good days and bad days. They will demonstrate that they do not have it all together. Occasionally, they will just plain fail. Jesus will spend three years with them, training them constantly, but they will succeed only now and then. That should be our expectation, too. As we meet new people and try to develop a relationship and guide them into the gospel, it will not go smoothly. That is to be expected. Learn to laugh.

Moving along in chapter 5, Jesus loved people, He did what was best for them (12 – 26):

And it happened when He was in a certain city, that behold, a man who was full of leprosy saw Jesus; and he fell on his face and implored Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean."

Then He put out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." Immediately the leprosy left him. And He charged him to tell no one, "But go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as a testimony to them, just as Moses commanded."

However, the report went around concerning Him all the more; and great multitudes came together to hear, and to be healed by Him of their infirmities. So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed.

Now it happened on a certain day, as He was teaching, that there were Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting by, who had come out of every town of Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was present to heal them. Then behold, men brought on a bed a man who was paralyzed, whom they sought to bring in and lay before Him. And when they could not find how they might bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the housetop and let him down with his bed through the tiling into the midst before Jesus.

When He saw their faith, He said to him, "Man, your sins are forgiven you."

And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, He answered and said to them, “Why are you reasoning in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Rise up and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins”— He said to the man who was paralyzed, “I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.”

Immediately he rose up before them, took up what he had been lying on, and departed to his own house, glorifying God. And they were all amazed, and they glorified God and were filled with fear, saying, “We have seen strange things today!”

Jesus’ purpose in His earthly ministry was to prepare people for the soon-to-be-revealed Kingdom of God. He proved that He was from God through His healings. But, optimizing His time meant He could only heal so many in one place before He had to move along to the next. Further, He was not there to create a show, become the traveling entertainment. So, stopping to heal that leper, who obviously was not part of any crowd due to his malady, was just plain compassion for that individual. Jesus surely knew that this man would not be able to keep his mouth shut. Could you? So, acting out of love was going to have the result of giving Him less time to sleep.

The same was true of the paralyzed man. This was a controversy Jesus did not need. The religious power-brokers were right there, ready to create problems for this upstart. But, motivated by the faith He saw in both the paralyzed man and in his friends, Jesus used the disruption to not only do what was best for the paralyzed man and his friends, but also to challenge the close-minded religious leaders.

How do we show this kind of miraculous compassion? Obviously, we have not been endowed with Jesus’ type of healing power. And, a considerable number of individuals and groups do nice things for those with needs. Notice that Jesus did not decide to not play by the rules in order to lessen the inconvenience to Himself. He told the leper, “Go show yourself to the priest, ...as it says in the Law of Moses.” The process for being declared free from leprosy was long and involved (recorded in Leviticus 14, the whole chapter). And all Jesus got out of it was unwanted attention. He could easily have said, “I’m telling you that your leprosy is gone. You can skip the inspections and rituals.”

Helping someone can become inconvenient. Aside from the cost to ourselves in time and money, that good deed often attracts others who want a similar good deed performed for them. Jesus just did what was right in the moment, not thinking too hard about what the future ramifications might be. It’s not that we need to kick ourselves every time we bypass a panhandler. After all, those miracles of healing did not cost Him anything beyond time, energy, and future crowds more interested in the show than the message. Still, we can have our eyes and hearts open so that when we see the potential for a random act of kindness, we will do it before we have completely passed it by.

The paralyzed man had not wronged Jesus some time in the past. Jesus was not telling him that He, Jesus, was pushing that problem from the past aside so that they could be friends again. The obvious meaning of what Jesus said was that the paralyzed man was square with God. Jesus did not say, “I forgive you,” but rather, “You are forgiven.” But saying that, the scribes and Pharisees concluded rightly that what Jesus meant was that God’s forgiveness was assured, and that Jesus had the right to say that. Jesus used the occasion to couple a spiritual truth to a physical act for the paralyzed man, and to challenging the thinking of the observers.

How can we do that? Obviously, we cannot heal like Jesus did. But, how can we help someone and make a spiritual point at the same time? Like when we visit a faithful person in a nursing home or hospital. Unbelieving or not very believing family are likely to be there, too. We can make a point to talk about the benefits of moving on before actually praying for their recovery. We just might get the family to think about the situation in spiritual terms.

And the last scene in this chapter, Jesus responded to the hearts of people, both good hearts and bad hearts, rather than focusing on the physical.

After these things He went out and saw a tax collector named Levi [we learn from the Matthew account that this is Matthew], sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, "Follow Me." So he left all, rose up, and followed Him. Then Levi gave Him a great feast in his own house. And there were a great number of tax collectors and others who sat down with them. And their scribes and the Pharisees complained against His disciples, saying, "Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

Then they said to Him, "Why do the disciples of John fast often and make prayers, and likewise those of the Pharisees, but Yours eat and drink?" And He said to them, "Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them; then they will fast in those days."

Then He spoke a parable to them, "No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved. And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, 'The old is better.'"

In case you are not familiar with winemaking in ancient times, when grape juice ferments, it generates carbon dioxide, which creates pressure in the container. You can't leave the container open to the air to relieve the pressure or the alcohol will oxidize into acetic acid – vinegar. A new wineskin, generally made of tanned goatskin or sheepskin, expands with the pressure. An old wineskin has already been stretched, so will burst under the pressure.

Dropping back to the first scene, the banquet put on by Matthew to which he had invited his socially ostracized friends. So why were the scribes and Pharisees present? Perhaps Jesus invited them along just to set up this situation so He could answer their question and expose their close-mindedness. Or, they could have just showed up and invited themselves. Such was common in that time. A banquet at a rich person's house was generally served in the courtyard, one side of which had the gate to the city, which would be open. Any passer-by could see what was going on. The scribes and Pharisees were an arrogant bunch, so assumed that any banquet would benefit from their presence. Poor people tended not to try this tactic because the rich host probably would send a servant to ask the poor person to leave, which would be very embarrassing socially. Uninvited scribes and Pharisees were rarely if ever asked to leave because they had social standing which they had invented for themselves.

No matter how the situation arose, Jesus used the potentially embarrassing scene to illustrate a primary characteristic of Himself and His ministry. He was there to save sinners, and one must expect sinners to have a few flaws. Deal with it.

Hopefully, we have this same characteristic. Jesus did not avoid those with ethical shortcomings. We have no record of Him hanging out with sinners who had no interest in His message, but we have several scenes where He had no qualms about socializing with those who showed a glimmer of interest.

People who find themselves on the outskirts of society generally do not like where life has put them, but have no idea how to fix the problem. They are stuck. Jesus offered an opportunity to get out of the hole they had dug for themselves. We can do the same. Jesus saw something in Matthew and invited him to join His little band. Matthew was overjoyed to have been asked, and responded with the most socially acceptable gesture he had, dinner for an obviously poor group. He also invited his social outcast friends to come in hopes that they, too, would see the opportunity to get out of the lives they already hated. I am not suggesting that we frequent disreputable establishments in the vague hope that we may just be able to strike a conversation about the gospel. That's not what Jesus did. No, He struck up a conversation and was not worried about who might see them talking. Then, He just let things happen, and took advantage of opportunities.

We don't need to be concerned about having a person with a bad reputation over for supper, or going to their place, or talking with them in public. Those who would object create their own opportunity to be taught about the gospel. Associating does not imply condoning. We cannot demand that the "sinners" fix themselves first. That is contrary to the "good news." But, if people are not interested in relating to God, but are consumed with earthly life, be polite and walk away.

The Scriptures about being separated from sinners are about church folks who are divisive (Titus 3:10, Jude 19), call bad things good (1 Corinthians 5:9 – 13), or assert that Jesus did not come in the flesh (1 John 2:18 – 19, 4:2 – 3, 2 John 7 – 11). Being separated from sinners does not mean to stay away from the people of the world, or, as Paul put it, you would have to leave the planet (1 Corinthians 5:9 – 10).

We have been a part of the conversions of several people who had earned their poor reputations, including inviting ex-cons from the half-way house to church potlucks. Those invited usually were surprised that we treated them as human beings, and, after getting past their trust issues, have found a fruitful audience. In addition to the great feeling of participating in the rescue of someone obviously on a disastrous path, we get questions from those who see the results, like, "What did you do to him?"

In the second little scene about fasting, Pharisees in general fasted twice a week, Mondays and Thursdays. As Jesus noted a few times, some Pharisees did it for show (Luke 18:12, Matthew 6:16, Matthew 23:23), although some certainly were sincere. However, the Law did not ask anyone to do it except on the Day of Atonement, once each year in September.

John the Baptist's disciples fasted often for two reasons. First, John was in prison and they were worried that he would be executed. Second, at least John, if not his disciples, understood the predictions about the Messiah, so they were very aware that Jesus had terrible things in His near future.

So, John's disciples fasted. The religious elites fasted. Why did Jesus and His disciples not fast? Inquiring minds want to know. Jesus' answer? Fasting needs to be associated with grief, not just a routine religious practice. John's disciples had legitimate grief. The Pharisees did it routinely, even the sincere ones, as a demonstration of piety, which was not the point. That is the same thinking that got a large proportion of churches to teach that sacrifice was about giving some thing up. But it was not. In the Law of Moses, sacrifice was a celebration of forgiveness with family and friends in the presence of God. You were not giving up anything.

The sacrifice became the main course in a big family meal celebrating that God had forgiven you. It was not that you were forgiven when your sacrifice died, since you only did that three times a year. Jesus' point was that fasting, a demonstration of grief, was not appropriate in this phase of His ministry when He was spreading the message about the soon-to-be revealed eternal kingdom, which happened in Acts 2. Later in His ministry, there will be grief, when Jesus became the sacrifice for all people of all time. But at this time, fasting would have no purpose.

Do we have customs and practices that have lost their original meaning? Are we applying some things inappropriately? Some groups give up stuff as a symbol of suffering as Jesus suffered. First, He did not ask us to do that. Second, most of His ministry was upbeat and positive. Only the part at the end was hard, and we should celebrate the success of the resurrection, not focus on the death without which there could be no resurrection. Afflicting ourselves for the sake of affliction is nowhere in the New Testament. In fact, Paul wrote against it in Colossians 2:23.

Further, Jesus went on to say that this new message was new, not a rebuilding of the old. He called it a new garment in that you do not cut a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. You don't put new wine in old wineskins. The Law has no place in the gospel.

The character of Jesus is what we follow, what we emulate. The slogan, "What would Jesus do?" is a good touchstone. Jesus took the initiative and solicited people to be part of the movement. He did not wait for them to fix themselves, or come searching, or get a proper Biblical education. He picked up people who were tired of the way things are and wanted something better. Jesus did what was best for people, even if they did not recognize at the time that it was best. He did not think about what it cost Him in inconvenience or uproar. He just did it. And, He responded to hearts, to character, to the desire to be something more, rather than getting people to follow the rules.