
It seems like a lifetime ago that I was a Theatre Arts major in college. After I graduated, my involvement in theatre went from “my primary focus” to – well – to zero. I went to graduate school for history, got married, went into insurance, had kids… yadda yadda yadda… and here I am standing before you today – a pastor in a pulpit. +++ But there are some things you learn about performance that are like riding a bicycle – that you never forget:… things like knowing when your face is in the hotspot of the lights… varying the tempo, volume, and the pitch of your voice … reading and managing the energy in the room… paying attention to where you focus your eyes… +++ Those are just a few… +++ +++ All of these things served me well in my years of corporate training – teaching classes and facilitating meetings – and they continue to be valuable as a pastor. +++ +++ Of course, there’s one variable that you usually can’t do anything about: and that’s when your audience is a Tough Crowd. You can tell pretty quickly – like when the opening scene doesn’t get the laughs it usually does. +++ +++ You do everything right – you’re hitting all the cues – the highs – the lows – and… it seems like… they’re just looking at you – maybe listening – but they aren’t buying what you’re selling. +++ Then… even if you do get them to respond once or twice… the next thing you know, they’d just be sitting there again – unwilling to get involved. +++ Live performance is a two-way street – a give-and-take – the audience should be drawn in – involved – a part of the evening – taking what you give them, and giving something back… I mean, you can just go through the motions – say the lines – but if they’re not involved – the evening falls flat. +++ Tough Crowd. +++ +++ It happens to comedians, too. Sometimes they come out – deliver some of their best Grade-A material… – their timing is clicking… - the jokes are on-point… – but the room is as quiet as crickets – or worse… you get the hecklers. +++ Here’s what Rodney Dangerfield said about it: Some rooms are tough – you get No Respect… “At [some] places I worked… they want to pick a fight with you. You walk off the floor and somebody says, ‘I think you stink – what are you gonna do about it?’ They think you’re bad and [so] they want to beat you up… Tough joints. Tough [Crowds].” He says somebody “asked me, ‘Why not quit, who needs that humiliation?’ But instead, you go out the next day looking for another job and get humiliated all over again. So it's a strange need, I guess, to want to be a comedian.” +++ You get No Respect… but it’s who you are… it’s what you do. +++ +++ Tough Crowds.

I wonder if that’s how God feels, trying to get through to us – tugging at the celestial necktie, complaining, “I get No Respect.” +++ If there’s anything humans have proven to be since the beginning of time – it’s a Tough Crowd. We hear what God wants from us and we nod like bobble-head dolls:: – “Yep, yep… that’s what we’re going to do – and we mean it this time.” And then we keep doing whatever we want to do. – It goes in one ear and out the other. +++ Starting in the Garden of Eden – the Lord gives us a paradise to live in – all this nice food and peacefulness. Just one thing… “Don’t eat the fruit from that… one… tree.” So we go straight for it… +++ “Stay away from carved images and figures of other Gods,” – so straightaway, we made a golden calf and start dancing around it. +++ Tough Crowd.

So far, during this season between Epiphany and Lent we have been investigating the ways God calls us – and how we respond. Last week we talked about the call of Jeremiah, and how the last thing he wanted was to be a prophet. He said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” +++ And we remembered Moses at the burning bush: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? What if they don’t believe me or listen to me? But I’m not an eloquent speaker – I can’t do what you’re asking.” +++ But we also learned that God doesn’t take “no” for an answer. +++ And in today’s scripture readings, we see it again. +++ Now, to be fair, in our gospel reading, I can understand why they’re a Tough Crowd – Simon Peter, James, and John have been fishing all night without catching a single fish. When Jesus tells them to head back out to deep water, Peter is probably thinking about the fact that Jesus isn’t even a fisherman – so, what does he know? But – “OK – if you say so, we’ll put down the nets.” …When they haul in more fish than they can handle, they see that Jesus offers abundant life. But then, Peter shies away, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” So Jesus reassures him, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” +++ You are good enough! You can do this!
You belong with me!... And so they followed him. +++ Tough Crowd – but Jesus persevered, and got through to them anyway. +++ +++ And Isaiah doesn’t want to follow either, at first… “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips!” So angels fly to Isaiah with a live hot coal – they touch it to his lips – and proclaim that his sins have been blotted out… In God, you are clean! You are good enough! You can do this! +++ So when the Lord asks, “Whom shall I send?” – Isaiah responds, “Here am I; send me!” +++ God cuts through our fear and excuses.

It’s not going to be easy. In fact, Peter and Isaiah will have plenty of tough crowds of their own to face. The religious leaders and Roman authorities will resist everything Jesus and his followers do, eventually crucifying him – then persecuting his Apostles as they build the church – and eventually, Peter himself is believed to have been crucified in Rome. +++ As for Isaiah, he is warned about tough crowds right here in our reading, as he accepts the call: the people will listen, but not comprehend; look, but not understand. They will stop their ears, and shut their eyes. +++ Every step of the way, it seems, we throw up roadblocks to the Word of God. Those who are called are hesitant and make excuses. Once they come around and do God’s work – they are met skepticism, disbelief, even violence… +++ Tough Crowds – all around.

So, why doesn’t Christ just give up on us? – After God does everything right – hitting all the cues – the highs – the lows – all Grade-A material – and we just don’t pay attention – or don’t understand – or we simply aren’t buying it? Why doesn’t God just give up and do everything without our help? Just make us all listen – or, solve the world’s problems with the blink of an eye instead of asking us to pitch in and get involved. +++ It’s because Life in the Lord is RELATIONAL – it’s like live Performance – at its core, it’s a two-way street – a give-and-take. We are made in God’s image, and we’re part of God’s plan – we should be drawn in – involved – taking what we are given, and giving something back… or creation itself falls flat. +++ Even when we don’t listen – even when we give No Respect to the Lord – we keep getting called – we keep getting included – and empowered to do what we need to do.

Like Peter, we are all sinful – like Isaiah, we all have unclean lips. We can all be weak and selfish – we have short attention spans – we don’t have as many skills as we’d like to have. In our own ways, we’ve all been fishing all night without a single catch… +++ +++ So… I have to wonder. Are WE a “tough crowd” when Christ calls us to do his work in the world? +++ As Christians across this land, do we sit in our pews on Sunday morning and nod our heads to whatever we hear at church, without taking personal ownership of what Christ calls us to do?: +++ – “Yes – we’ll go tell the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world,”::: yet fewer and fewer people seem to even be aware that Christ’s gift is love rather than judgment. +++ “No – we won’t judge others based on our own prejudices and flawed ideas of righteousness,”::: yet Christians are consistently responsible for writing and supporting laws targeting the rights of women, minorities, and the LGBTQ community. +++ “Yes – we’ll work for justice, to make our economy less hostile to the poor,” yet we allow businesses and our own tax code to prey on the poor more than ever before. +++ – “No – we would never minimize the needs of the most vulnerable among us.” ::: yet our public schools are crumbling and teachers have to spend their own money for supplies, while in many communities the elderly have nowhere to turn  – nowhere to live – when they are left alone… and unable to care for themselves. +++ +++ Are we, … collectively, … even PAYING ATTENTION to the Gospel of Jesus Christ? +++ We ARE a Tough Crowd… …

But, the GOOD NEWS is::: God doesn’t give up! Christ still comes to us by the seashore… Still fills our nets with incredible abundance… And still calls us to follow. +++ Have confidence – regardless of your faults and shortcomings – regardless of your sins – or your lack of certain skills… have confidence … that the work of the Lord is yours to take on – yours to carry. +++ So, when you hear the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send,” you hear it, you own it, and you can confidently reply, “Here am I;… send me!”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.