

5 Epiphany, Year C, 2010
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You Are Not Unqualified

Qualifications. How many of us didn't get a job we applied for because someone said we weren't qualified? Or – perhaps more frequently -- how many times have we not even applied for that job that we would have liked, because we *ourselves* thought we were not qualified? We live in a culture where we measure ourselves and others by qualifications.

So, how about the job of serving God ... what qualifications do we need for that? Well, let's look at what the job entails and see if our resumes measure up.

What does it mean to do ministry? I've directed you to these pages before, but maybe it's a good time to do it again, because this is an important message. It's your job description as a Christian. Take a look at page 855 in your Prayer Book.

Q. Who are the ministers of the Church? A. The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons. Notice the order that the Prayer Book lists its ministers ... Lay persons are listed first, above Bishops. Why's that? Hmm.

Q. What is the ministry of the laity? A. The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; and please note that there are three parts to the answer, please note:

- 1) *to bear witness to him wherever they may be and,*
- 2) *according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and*
- 3) *to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.*

This is the job description for a minister of God, your job description as a Christian. The job description for you. Yet, too often we don't step up to this ministry because we suspect we are not qualified.

So, what about them? (*pointing to the four gospel writers*). Every Sunday I get to stare at them during the service, but maybe you don't, because you're facing in this direction. Turn around and take a look at them. Those four guys. They're obviously important guys, otherwise they wouldn't be up there in those stained glass windows, right? Who are they? And what were their qualifications?

Let's talk about them for a minute. They're the four gospel writers – from left to right – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Four of the Big Guns of the Church. Let's talk about them for a minute. There's Matthew on the left. He was a tax collector, despised among the people, considered to be in the same lot as prostitutes. Oh yes, he had money, but has he gotten it fairly? He was viewed the way we might think about an AIG executive who just received a million dollar bonus out of bailout money. He was resented, seen as greedy and not trustworthy. Then next to him is Mark. Mark's credentials weren't so hot either. He didn't have what it takes for real missionary work. He bailed out on St. Paul's mission when the going got hard, went running back to his mother's comfortable house. In fact, Paul didn't want to have anything to do with him after that. Mark ... he was a failure. Then there's Luke, third one from the left. Luke the physician. But Luke was an outsider, he was a Gentile, different from all the other writers of books of the bible, who were Jews. And he was a late comer, had never seen Jesus, had to learn of the resurrection second hand. Luke... an outsider. Then, at the far right is John. John was the youngest apostle. Maybe too young ... even on the cross, Jesus assigned his mother to look after John. And then we know of John's ambition. He and his brother James had a little problem with ambition. They wanted to be the top dogs among the apostles, so much so that the other disciples came to resent them. John, too young, too ambitious. So I look at those four guys and I have to conclude: Untrustworthy, a failure, an outsider, too young and too ambitious. Hmm, unqualified for something so holy as representing Christ and his church.

Then there are the people in today's lessons, where we run into three more of the really Big Guns of the Bible: Isaiah, Paul, and Peter. We might as well throw in Jeremiah from last week's Old Testament lesson and you've got the Pro Bowl lineup of Bible heroes.

I am struck by one common denominator among these prophets and evangelists and apostles of the Bible: how utterly *unqualified* they were! Last Sunday we heard Jeremiah (Jer 1:4-10) offer excuses to avoid the Lord's calling. He felt that he was too young and too inarticulate to be of much value to God. Then on Wednesday nights, our Bible study group has been studying the ministry of the apostle Paul and have seen how he began his ministry as a rage-filled man in need of an industrial strength anger-management course and in his own estimation "*unfit to be called an apostle*" (today's epistle from 1 Corinthians 15). Also today, we hear the prophet Isaiah offering up reasons for his lack of qualifications for ministry: "*Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips ...*" Isaiah knew he was unqualified ... his sinful background eliminated him for serious consideration as a disciple of God.

Now, maybe you do not fall into these categories: most of us do not have the foul-mouthed problems of Isaiah, we do not have the hate filled rage of Paul, and Lord knows that few of us are too young like Jeremiah.

But then we run into Peter in this week's Gospel (Luke 5:1-11). Jesus, in the boat with Peter, tells him, "*Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.*" Peter responds like many of us do when called upon by God: "*Master, we have worked all night long and caught nothing*" You see, Peter is worn down by the weight of life. He's seen the disappointments, the harsh realities, the dreams that didn't come true, the plans that didn't work out. The hopes that were dashed. *We have worked all night long and caught nothing.* How could he be any good for work as challenging as ministry with Jesus?

So there you have it. The Big Boys of the Bible. They were not qualified. Okay, now here's the bad news, folks. You are not qualified either. Maybe this comes as a blow. You are *unqualified* to do God's work. You are unqualified to be an effective witness to Christ wherever you may be. You are unqualified to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world. You are unqualified to be a part of the life, worship and governance of the church. You are unqualified. And so am I. And so is everyone else.

The reason it is possible – why it is in fact necessary – for us to be ministers, is that, even though we are unqualified, we have a God who is very qualified. It is based on God's qualifications, not yours, that you are called to serve him.

What distinguishes Jeremiah, Isaiah, Paul and Peter from us is not that they had better qualifications, more gifts, more talents, whatever. No! They were unqualified too! What distinguishes them from us is that they said YES to God, IN SPITE of their lack of confidence, lack of courage, lack of talent. They said YES.

What is the work around us that needs to be done?

Witness to Christ wherever you may be ... okay, that seems pretty challenging ... but wait, you don't have to be Mr. Bible Answer Man to do this, or Miss Holier than Thou, or Mother Teresa or Billy Graham. But you do have to witness ... tell others, show others, how Christ has made a difference in your life. And you are required to do it everywhere ... that means at work, at the store, with your family, wherever you may be. Remember, you are not qualified to do this ... so excuses are even needed. But you CAN do this, and are asked to do this because of an awesome God who promises to give you words, who promises to be right at your side, who promises to protect you. *Witness to Christ wherever you may be.*

Carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world ... again, you are not qualified to do this, but God has given some gifts – to everyone of you – that he will use, as he guides you into the place he wants you to serve. This work means bringing God's peace

and love and rescue and good news into those places where there is need, poverty, hunger, discouragement, and loss. And, newsflash, even here in Stevens Point, the needs are all over the place. *Carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world.*

And finally God wants you to *serve in the church*. Make no mistake, these aspects of Christian ministry are not easy work. It's almost guaranteed, in fact, to take you out of your comfort zone. It will seem at times like you have failed. It will be hard, just like any effort to change the world.

Now you may want to draw back from all this, and in fact no one will force you to do this work. But God is calling you to do it, and he – the qualified One -- will be there to help you do it, and what you will get out of it for yourself will be nothing less than the greatest joy you can imagine.

Isaiah offered his excuses to God – like most of the others we talked about, offered excuses like you and I have. Isaiah said, “But Lord I have unclean lips.” God didn't want to hear about that. Of course Isaiah was unqualified. But then God said to Isaiah, “So whom shall I send and whom will go for me?” Isaiah, the unqualified one, speaks I hope for us: God asks, “Whom shall I send and whom will go for me?” And Isaiah says, “Here am I Lord, send me.” God had big plans for Isaiah and he has big plans for you. What will you say when God calls: “Whom shall I send and whom will go for me?” I pray it is this: “Here am I Lord, send me.” AMEN.