

“Called to Rise”

Date: February 25, 2018 **Place:** Lakewood UMC **Occasion:** Disciple’s Heart series, 2 **Texts:** Colossians 3:1-17; Mark 16:1-20 **Themes:** Perfection, Sanctification; Discipleship; Growth

In her poem “We Never Know How High We Are,” Emily Dickinson conveys the idea that we never know all that we are capable of being until we are “called to rise.” We never know all that we can be until something or someone calls us to come up higher, to live more boldly, to love more deeply, to give ourselves more freely.

We never know all that God has for us until we hear Christ calling us, the way he called his first disciples to rise up and follow him. Then we discover there is more to who we are, more to life itself than we had known or settled for before. You and I are called to rise.

The fisherman heard that call beside the Sea of Galilee and they rose up to follow Jesus. They left their nets and their former lives to follow Jesus and center their lives on loving God and loving others. They became disciples. Because they said yes to his call, they discovered a new life they otherwise never would have known.

I’ve discovered that every disciple has a unique story of the way his or her journey began. There is no one-size-fits-all pattern. Though some stories are similar, none is ever quite the same as any other. The evidence is that the Spirit of God is amazingly patient and infinitely creative in finding ways to enter into our lives and call us into the life of discipleship.

The Bible is filled with a variety of stories of how people first experienced Christ: Shepherds heard the good news in the blazing light of the angels. Wise men found the Christ child at the end of a long and difficult search. Fisherman met Jesus while working with their nets.

Matthew met Jesus while collecting taxes; and a house full of tax collectors and sinners met Jesus at a dinner party at Matthew's house.

A centurion at the cross realized that Jesus is the Son of God by watching him die. Saul was blinded by his presence on the Damascus Road. Timothy learned of Christ from his mother and grandmother. The gospel is the story of how ordinary people in ordinary places discovered the extraordinary presence of Jesus and *rose up* to follow him.

Paul offers that same call to the Colossians with his bold challenge: "Therefore if you were raised with Christ, look for the things that are above." (3:1) He called them to rise above the mundane, ordinary ways of living in order to be conformed to the likeness of Christ.

My journey in faith got kick-started in 1968 when I attended a Lay Witness Mission at my home church in Baltimore, Maryland. I was in junior high school. After an intensive weekend of sharing and listening to others tell us about what a difference Jesus made in their lives, I heard the call of God to go forward at the altar call on Saturday night.

I heard and answered the call to rise up and follow Jesus, centering my life on loving God and loving others. How about you? When did you hear the call and respond? When did you first decide that you were going to leave the ordinary life and begin the *extraordinary* life of following Jesus? Perhaps today could be the day.

Our journey of discipleship begins when we hear that same call and choose to follow Jesus. The call may come to different people in different ways, but it is an invitation to follow Jesus in a way that leads toward what John Wesley called holiness, Christian perfection, or "being made perfect in love."

John Wesley asked these same three questions of the preachers he ordained, and we are still using them today. Bishop James Ault asked them of me when I was ordained: “Are you going on to perfection? Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life? Are you earnestly striving for perfection in love?”

They are questions that could be asked of the laity as well. For this is the goal of Christian living. The goal of the Christian life is not merely to make a decision for Jesus and then wait till you die to go to Heaven. And that’s all that it means for some Christians. But for Methodists, we are being changed from glory to glory in this life, as God’s love continually perfects us in love.

I almost hate to use the word *perfection*, because it reminds many of us of “perfectionism,” which has only led to guilt and shame because none of us can ever be without fault. And I am reluctant to use the word *holy*, because the word conjures up images of “holier-than-thou” Christians we’ve met before, who are judgmental and arrogant.

I’ve not found the perfect word to describe the goal, other than to say we are becoming more and more like Jesus. We are taking on his image in our life and our heart. And it takes time. And it takes discipline. Our culture prefers quick fixes for everything.

But the discipleship path takes time, and patience and discipline. A person can decide to follow Jesus in a moment, but being formed into Christ’s likeness takes a lifetime. We can catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God in a brief parable, but working it out in this world take times and costly effort.

Christian perfection is the result of the patient, persistent work of the Spirit of God within us and through us. Rev. Magrey R. deVega gives us a

fresh way of imagining the process of sanctification when he reflects upon a visit he took to Mt. Rushmore. After viewing the breathtaking spectacle of Gutzon Borglum's carving of the four presidents, he stopped by the gift shop where he purchased a photograph of the mountain taken in 1902 before the sculptor began his work.

That photograph now hangs in Pastor deVega's office as a reminder of what he describes as the way the Spirit "patiently, diligently carves away at the hardened facades that conceal the image of God that lies deep within us."

It took the sculptor, Gutzon Borglum, 12 years to carve away the stone in order to reveal all the faces that he alone could see inside the mountain. This could be a metaphor for the way God sees something within each of us, something that no one else can see.

The new discovery for Pastor deVega was that the sculptor allowed an extra three inches in each of the figures' features to account for the weather, which wears away an inch of granite every 100,000 years. This suggests that it will take 300,000 years for the carving to actually fulfill the sculptor's intentions. Talk about patience!

Pastor deVega writes: "I can see that at every turn, God has been at work, chipping away at our hardened hearts and rough-edged personalities, teaching us – sometimes painfully – about being utterly dependent on God and clear in our commitment to God's ways.

Just like Borglum's crew used both explosives and nail files to carve into the granite, our lives are filled with monumental moments, both great and small, that change our lives forever."

My friends, as followers of Christ, we are always works in progress; imperfect disciples on the way toward perfection; ordinary men and women

who need the continuing work of the Divine Cardiologist to heal our stony hearts, replacing them with hearts that are fully alive and being formed into a human likeness of the heart of God.

By God's grace, we are going on to perfection. May it be so in each of our lives. Amen.

Let us pray:

"Loving God, thank you for revealing your love in your son, Jesus, our Lord. Thank you for the call that goes out to every human being, to follow Jesus. God, some may not have made a decision, yet, to follow Jesus. We pause now, to give them that opportunity.

God, with heads bowed, we wait upon your Holy Spirit to touch hearts. Someone here today is ready to make a decision and put their feet on the discipleship path and begin the journey of intentionally following Jesus. God speak to them clearly, calling them by name, and asking them to center their lives on loving you and loving others.

Merciful God, bless us all as we go forth. Renew our commitment to following Jesus. Renew our willingness to allow your Spirit to chip away at our lives, until all that can be seen is the likeness of Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen."

This sermon borrows heavily from the companion reader of the book *A Disciple's Heart: Growing in Love and Grace*, by James A. Harnish with Justin Larosa. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015, "Where Do We Go From Here?" pp. 13-21.