**JESUS CALLS US TO BE WITH HIM**

**(Mark 3:1-19)**

“Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him…” (vs. 13-14a)

The theme of our 2015 Midwest Summer Bible Conference is based on Jesus’ words “Follow me”. What is your first impression when you hear “Follow me”? Some people may get all excited, wanting to charge headfirst into battle with Jesus leading the way! But I think more people are probably apprehensive. “Is this about a rigorous discipleship training program? Am I going to be disciplined against my will? Did I make a mistake coming here?” Relax. Take a deep breath. Yes, there is a cost when it comes to following Jesus. But this is not what it’s all about. It’s about forming an eternal love relationship with Jesus Christ, our good shepherd. It’s about spending time with him, learning who he is and being transformed to see things the way he sees them. It’s mysterious. It’s life-altering. It’s anything but boring. In this opening message, I want us to adopt Jesus’ perspective. How does Jesus see individual people and the world? Why did he call his disciples? And what vision does he have for all of us today? I pray that the Holy Spirit may open our eyes to realize what a privilege it is that Jesus calls us to be with him.

**I. The world needs Jesus, the good shepherd (vs. 1-12)**

Let’s start by looking at verse 1. “Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there.” This man was no stranger to suffering. According to Luke 6:6, it was his right hand that was shriveled. In that society, it would have been very difficult for him to work a normal job or get married. When people came to shake his hand, he had to awkwardly extend his left. He must have felt no one could really understand him. Maybe he sat alone in one corner of the synagogue with his hand tucked away in his pocket to avoid notice. Day after day, he wrestled with the idea, “Why did God allow this to happen to me?”

In a larger sense, aren’t many of us like this man? No, not many of us, but *all* of us. No matter how stable they appear from the outside, everyone deals with embarrassing life problems that are beyond their control. This is often due to a persistent sin problem we have been holding on to. We know our sin is wrong and yet we love it so much that we cannot let it go. We try to hide it away from the view of others but we cannot escape its consequences. Sin shrivels our relationship with God and makes us inwardly dead and useless.

But on this day, the man with the shriveled hand found reason to hope. Jesus, the good shepherd, had come to his synagogue. When Jesus discovered his condition, his heart went out to him immediately. Yet before he could act, something ugly was developing behind the scenes. Some Pharisees were watching Jesus closely with the hopes of twisting his healing miracle into an accusation of breaking the Sabbath. These men had already clashed with Jesus on several occasions. They were appalled when he exercised his authority to forgive sins. They cringed when he ate with tax collectors and sinners. They were utterly offended by his disregard for the traditions of the elders. Jesus’ growing popularity blinded them with jealousy. They felt as though their established way of life was being threatened.

Jesus knew exactly what was going on. Yet, he was not afraid. He had already determined in his mind what he would do. He called the man with the shriveled hand forward saying, “Stand up in front of everyone.” Then he asked them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” Jesus cut right to the essence of the controversy between him and the religious leaders. Even a child knows that doing good and saving life are what is lawful! But they remained silent. The longer Jesus stared at them, the more they hardened their stubborn hearts. This filled Jesus with righteous anger until he became deeply disturbed. These were supposed to be the shepherds of Israel! Yet they didn’t care at all about what was good. They ignored the lost and suffering people all around them. They abused their privilege as God’s servants for their own security and profit. God’s heart grieved over the corrupt leadership that was like a parasite to his people.

But Jesus wouldn’t allow them to stand in the way of his compassion for the man with the shriveled hand. Turning to the man he said, “Stretch out your hand.” This was not easy, as the man had to overcome his self-consciousness, his doubts and his fear of the religious leaders. But when he did so, his hand was completely restored, just as sound as the other! God’s love suddenly became very real to him. He realized God was in control of his life and had never forgotten him. He accepted Jesus as his shepherd and the kingdom of God flooded into his soul. He was a totally new person in body, mind and spirit. Jesus’ words have power to take whatever is dead and useless within us and give it new life. If you stretch out your shriveled element to Jesus, trusting his power and willingness to heal you, he will do it!

Now as the Pharisees went from bad to worse, “Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed” (7). Jesus was quickly gaining rock star status. Verse 8 tells us, “When they heard about all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon.” This shows us how desperately this generation was longing for God. Without proper guidance from the religious leaders, people were suffering under the rule of Satan. They were slaves to sin and to evil spirits. There was a famine of the word of God and people hungered for even a bite. In the face of Roman oppression, devastating diseases and growing immorality, it seemed as if God had forsaken his people.

In the midst of this great darkness, Jesus, the light of the world (Jn 8:12) began to shine. Jesus is Immanuel—God with us. He came to invade Satan’s kingdom and set the captives free from their slavery to sin and death. Jesus was totally different from the religious leaders. Matthew 9:36 says, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Rather than condemning the spiritually sick and lost, Jesus’ heart was broken for them. So he humbly served the crowds by giving them what they needed most, the word of God, to show them the wonderful purpose God had for each of their lives. Jesus’ message had authority. It spoke to people’s real-life problems. Jesus patiently shepherded people one-by-one to confess their sins and turn back to God. He healed every one of their diseases and drove out impure spirits. What people really need more than anything else is the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep (Jn 10:11).

Lacey Sturm had a rough childhood. Born to a mother of only 16 years of age, she never knew her father and her family struggled with poverty. Darkness began to weigh heavily on her heart at age 10, when her cousin was beaten to death by his own stepfather. She began crying herself to sleep every night over what seemed like such senseless pain and suffering in this world. She became an atheist, even believing it was her mission to convince others to reject God as well. But she only sank deeper into depression. One day at 16 years old, she decided to take her own life. When she came home from school, however, her grandmother surprised her, demanding that she attend church. Lacey went reluctantly, sitting in the back to avoid notice. During the sermon, the preacher suddenly began to cry. “There’s a suicidal spirit in the room,” he said. Lacey grew uncomfortable and headed for the door when she was approached by a deacon. “The Lord wants me to speak to you,” he told her. “He knows the pain in your heart. He’s seen you cry yourself to sleep at night. And he died to take that pain out of your heart. He experienced it while he was on the Cross, so you don’t have to keep holding it in there anymore.” When he prayed over Lacey, God’s love and holiness overwhelmed her. Jesus became her shepherd and set her free from the shame of her past sins. Today Lacey is most famous for being the lead vocalist of the Christian rock band Flyleaf. Last year she even released a book entitled “The Reason: How I Discovered a Life Worth Living.” There are still so many young men and women wandering in darkness, searching for something worth living for. There is hope if only they can find their shepherd Jesus who longs to heal their wounds and bring them home to their Heavenly Father.

**II. Disciples are called to be with Jesus and learn his shepherd heart (vs. 13-19)**

Jesus must have felt the weight of the whole world on his shoulders. The crowds were growing larger. His heart ached for the endless sea of suffering people. Without a long-term solution, his earthly ministry could only accomplish so much. At such a time, Jesus withdrew to a mountainside by himself (13a). According to Luke’s gospel, he spent the night there praying to God (Lk 6:12). His intention must have been to seek the Father’s will. Then what direction did the Father give him?

Look at verses 13-14a. “Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve…” Jesus suddenly set apart twelve men among his followers for a special purpose. Here, the number twelve signifies the enormous scope of Jesus’ vision. God began his world salvation work by raising the Twelve Tribes of Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:6). Now Jesus was designating his Twelve Apostles to lay a new foundation for the gospel to bring God’s salvation to the ends of the earth. There are many noble callings. People become teachers, doctors and even presidents with the hope of making a difference in people’s lives. But nothing compares to the glorious calling of our Lord Jesus Christ! It is the privilege of knowing the God of the universe and carrying out his will! It is the only kind of work we can do that will last for eternity.

Now it is important to note that Jesus did not first ask the Twelve for carefully-crafted résumés or reference letters. His calling was based solely on his sovereign choice. Becoming Jesus’ disciple is not of human origin, nor can it be earned by our best efforts. It is the grace of God upon unworthy sinners. Yet at the same time, one’s response is also essential, for we read that “…they came to him.” When the Twelve realized the supreme value of Jesus’ calling, they could make a clear decision to follow him immediately.

So what was Jesus’ plan for the Twelve? What does discipleship look like and how does God use it to meet the world’s spiritual needs? According to verse 14, Jesus’ primary objective for the discipleship community was simply “…that they might be with him…” In Jesus’ day, many influential leaders, including John the Baptist and the Pharisees, raised disciples. Disciples learned to follow their teacher’s lifestyle in everything—how to talk, how to pray, how to style their hair and so on. But Jesus intended to pass on to the Twelve much more than a set of skills. He wanted to develop a personal and eternal relationship with each of them in God’s love. In this school, the subject matter was himself and the world was his classroom. Through their life together, he would inscribe his very self onto his disciples’ hearts. When Jesus calmed the storm at sea, “They were terrified and asked each other, ‘Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!’” (Mk 4:41) They were speechless when he got down on his knees and began washing their feet, one-by-one. As they stood before the Cross, their hearts melted within them as Jesus cried out, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34). It wasn’t until Jesus stood before them in his glorious risen form that the Twelve realized they had been living in the presence of God this entire time! It was God who had called them, taught them, ate with them, served them and died for them. What a miracle, what unspeakable grace it is that Jesus wants to be with sinners like us!

We too can share such intimate fellowship with Jesus today. Have you ever had moments reading the Bible or listening to a message when Jesus’ presence suddenly became very real to you? When his words pierced your heart and everything else just faded into the background? I vividly recall one worship service when Jesus’ words to the woman caught in adultery spoke to my exact situation. I had lived as a slave to lust. I was caught in an immoral relationship and had caused much pain to myself and others. The word of God convicted me of my sin. But then came Jesus’ promise, “Then neither do I condemn you…Go now and leave your life of sin” (Jn 8:11). This was no longer someone else’s story. It was the Almighty God of the universe telling me that he loved me and had forgiven me for what I had done. He was telling me right then and there that if I wanted to obey him, I had to change my ways. I felt so afraid and powerless. So I prayed to God, asking for his help. That very night, God led me to the point where I could break off my immoral relationship. I remember not even having the strength to speak, yet all I had to do was say the word “Go” to leave it behind for good. I was amazed by God’s complete control over my life. I accepted Jesus as my shepherd and made a decision to start walking with him and serving his purpose from that day forward. What joy it is to know that God loves me and has a clear purpose for my life! To me, this is worth far more than anything I could have in this world.

Not only does Jesus want us to be with him, he also wants us to be *like* him. Scientists say that couples who live together for many years actually start to physically resemble one another. In the same way, we should spend so much time with Jesus that we become “little Jesus’s”, reflecting his love, meekness, courage, holiness and value system. We should fully surrender to his rule within our hearts. This includes sharing his shepherd heart for others. In fact, Jesus’ ultimate vision for the Twelve was “…that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons” (vs. 14b-15). Once Jesus brings God’s rule into a person’s heart, God can then use that person as his kingdom worker to drive out Satan and advance his kingdom in the lives of others. The content of the Twelve’s preaching was simple. It was everything they had seen and heard of Jesus. It was the stories of their own lives, what Jesus had done for them! This gave their message authority and allowed people to begin their own relationship with Jesus. Through such personal witnessing, the kingdom of God advances throughout the world one changed heart at a time.

Some people may think they don’t have “what it takes” to be a disciple of Jesus. But look at the men listed in verses 16-19. They aren’t exactly what you might call a “spiritual all-star team.” Take Simon Peter for example. He was nothing but an average fisherman with simple dreams. And yet Jesus gave him the name Peter, which means “Rock”, with the vision that he would become the unshakable leader of the church. Early on, Peter proved to be anything but. He competed with other disciples out of selfish ambition. He refused Jesus’ teaching on suffering. He even denied Jesus three times to save his own skin. But Jesus never gave up on him. Jesus repeatedly forgave him and restored his vision. In the Book of Acts, we find a different Peter. The “Rock” boldly stands before the crowds in Jerusalem proclaiming Jesus as the only way of salvation. Listen to what the Sanhedrin had to say about him in Acts 4:13. “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been *with* Jesus.” When people looked at Peter, they didn’t see a brilliant speaker or a learned scholar. They saw Jesus. Can you say that about yourself? Being used by God is not a matter of abilities or even one’s determination but a matter of God’s work in us. Anyone can be used because Christ has power to change a person, and no testimony is more powerful than that of a changed life. When Jesus personally invested in twelve simple men, molding them into shepherds after himself, the world was turned upside-down by the gospel. God has continued his world salvation work to this very day using not the large crowds, but the few humble people who are truly committed to him.

William Borden was born in Chicago in 1887 as the heir to a million dollar family fortune. Yet William had a sincere spiritual desire from a young age and gave his life over to Christ. After his high school graduation, his parents rewarded him with a one-year trip around the world. It was during this time that William’s heart began to be burdened for the world’s suffering people, especially those living without Christ. William wrote a letter to his parents announcing his intentions to renounce his wealth and all of its privileges to live as a missionary. At this time, he wrote two words in the back of his Bible: “No reserves”. When he entered Yale University in 1905, his classmates were deeply moved by the way in which he lived out his faith. William had a sense of problem over the immoral, humanistic atmosphere on campus. So he began to meet with a friend to pray and read Scripture together. Soon another student joined them and then another. By the end of William’s senior year, 1000 of Yale’s 1300 students were meeting in such groups. On top of all this, William founded the Yale Hope Mission for the marginalized people of New Haven. William personally went down to the docks to minister to drunkards and the poor, often being seen feeding someone and sharing with them the good news about Jesus. Eventually, William received God’s calling to go out as a missionary to the Muslim Kansu people of Northern China. At that time his father wrote him a letter warning him that he would never have a job in the family business. William wrote down a second phrase in his Bible: “No retreats”. After graduating from Princeton Seminary, William sailed to Egypt in order to learn Arabic on his way to China. But soon after his arrival, he caught spinal meningitis and in a matter of months died at the age of 25. There was an outpouring of grief from friends and family who lamented what seemed like such a tragic waste of life. But when his Bible was recovered, one more phrase was found that was dated just before his death: “No regrets”. “No reserves. No retreats. No regrets.” A life centered on being with Jesus and loving others without holding back—this is what’s most beautiful in God’s sight. The worst feeling would be to look back at the end of our lives and wonder what could have been if only we had cherished the privilege of following Jesus.

Jesus calls to be with him; to share a life-changing love relationship with him forever. There is no greater privilege than this. I believe Jesus is with us at this conference and is speaking to each of us personally through his life-giving words. If you have already made the decision to follow Jesus as his disciple, please remember how much grace God has given you thus far! I encourage you to renew your commitment to being *with* Jesus and being a shepherd or shepherdess for the needy people God has placed in your life. For those who haven’t yet made a clear decision, I urge you to listen to Jesus’ voice “Follow me” throughout the remainder of this conference. I urge you to accept his invitation to be with him, that you may discover the wonderful purpose he has for your life.