

Sermon: Calling Out The Best and Worst in Us**Scripture: Matthew 4:18-22****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: January 25th, 2026**

Jesus called out the best and the worst in people. The gospels are plain about that. And it seems that the best is called out of people at their worst and the worst is called out of people who believe they are at their best. It's an odd paradox that goes along quite well with the paradoxical nature of the gospels, paradoxes are threaded through, the first will be last and the last first and the meek and powerless will inherit the earth, not the rich and powerful, and of course the Creator of All executed on a cross, is the paradox that sits at the culmination of it all.

But this morning this is the paradox I want to invite us to meditate on, that Jesus calls out the best in people and he calls out the worst. He seems to often be fishing for which it's going to be, fishing for those who despite how bad their situation or bad they themselves seem to be, have a crack of an opening for the best to emerge and fishing for - or at least attentive to - those who in the fact that they are assured they are offering the world their best, somehow when the actual best comes in Jesus, their best is revealed as illusion and then their worst that is lurking right there beneath the surface arises.

That, it seems, is the effect that Love has on us, Love with a capital "L" I mean, Agape, Divine Love. It's not all pleasant and lovely, soft and warm. It can call out our worst as easily as our best, depending. If Jesus is God enfleshed, Love Manifest in human form, then this is most evident in the stories of the Gospel as we read about the seeming worst of people becoming their best and the seeming best of people becoming their worst. The prostitute woman with 7 demons, is one example, she who was maybe a

bad as one could be, at least to everyone around her. The effect Love had on her was that she was healed, restored, and became one of the disciples of Jesus, extending through her life the life and love of Jesus in the direction of others. Her very best, still there at the heart of who she was beneath layers of sin and sickness, was called out of her. And on the other hand, the religious leaders, the keepers of the status quo and keepers of their positions of authority and privilege, they, you could say, became the demon-possessed even as Jesus was all about exorcising such demons from people's lives, they became the demons deciding that they needed to shut Jesus down, shut him up and eliminate him. For them, the encounter with Love called out their worst.

A good question for us might be - if we encountered Agape in pure human form, like in the person of Jesus, whether our best or our worst would be called out of us. We could take a wild guess, by considering how entangled or attached we are with all of that which is less than loving. How insecure are we about being told that we are wrong or off-track, for instance? Cause purified love would probably be doing some of that to us, wouldn't you guess, telling us where we are off track or plain wrong in what we are thinking or how we are being. Wouldn't you guess that probably there are thoughts and ways that we cling to that are well beneath what love requires? And if I just stop and think about how well I tend to take my beloved spouse telling me when she thinks I'm wrong or off. I'm not sure I'd do much better with Love telling me and Love would always be right while I am certain that sometimes Tracy is just plain wrong about me being wrong!

So that's a thing. And then how do I think I'd do with what True Love, Divine Love, might require of me? This is what I am so struck by in this story of Jesus calling the disciples. How quickly and freely they do what Love asks of them, leave their jobs, their home, their father, and follow.

Maybe that's because they were sick and tired of it all anyway. We don't know. Maybe that's why Jesus called them in the first place, the fishermen who were not sittin' pretty in the economy of the Roman Empire but actually pretty crushed by it. Supposedly the fishermen of Galilee were exploited by the empire, of course they were, we shouldn't be surprised by that; that the workers and the locals got the worst of the deal while the ownership class, most removed from the actual work of the industry, claimed the wealth and benefits. So maybe that's why when Jesus called, the disciples were so ready to follow him and maybe that's why Jesus went to the shores of the Sea of Galilee because there he knew were people ready for some change and why he didn't go to those much more comfortable in their situated lives.

If Love called us to get up and go, would we go? I'd like to believe I would but I'm not so sure... and not only am I not so sure, I wonder if Love calling me to get up and go might create the opposite response, a hunkering down and resistance and a ton of justifications for why Love was out of Her mind. In other words, Love's call, I could imagine, could call out not the best but the worst in me.

While we're thinking of it, another good question is what is Love calling us to as a church with regard to this big beautiful building of ours? Is Love asking us - how do you stay financially viable First Congregational Church? What if Love is asking something more harrowing than that. We most all of us know and can imagine what is needed to make our church financially viable for the future - we are very responsible and very skilled at that - and we could all argue for why that's important. But what if Love is asking something more than that? What if love really doesn't care a whit about our financial viability but cares much more that we as a church are responding to those who are suffering in our wider community and the world? What if Love is calling us to something more than financial

viability? And if we can't imagine what in the world that would be as a church then is Love revealing our best or our worst?

But what is interesting is this - do you know what else along with Love has the capacity to call out the very best or the very worst in us. The opposite of Love does... call it evil or wickedness or villainy or depravity. There's a call also that evil can make, that can call out the very worst of us if we are not careful, but ironically evil's call can also call out the best of us.

What is it that Mr. Rogers' mother would say to him - when he encountered scary things in the news, his mother would say "look for the helpers. No matter what's happening you will always find the people who are helping." That's an example of how evil can call out the best. Who are the people helping in the face of the terrible acts of immigration enforcement right now? Who is allowing their best to be called out by the evil of masked government agents shooting people and taking women, children and the elderly? And where is evil multiplying evil by calling good people to lesser deeds or where good people find themselves justifying bad things?

As the authorities arrested Jesus and the religious leaders scapegoat him, their evil calls out the worst in the crowd and when given the choice to release him or crucify him by Pilate, they shout "crucify him, crucify him!" Evil calling out the worst and multiplying evil. And on the other hand when Joseph of Arimathea sees what his people are doing, he was a Sanhedrin, a member of the High Jewish Legislative and Judicial Council, when he saw what they had done to Jesus, he gave Jesus' disciples his own tomb for Jesus to be laid in after he was crucified. And there it is also, evil calling out the best.

How about for you and for me. When we encounter, much less suffer at the hands of the bad or the evil, what does it elicit in us? Rage?

Resentment? Desire for revenge? Or a renewed commitment to find a way to do good in response?

I'm afraid evil is running amok right now, and evil is not a person or a people, it is a force in this world that runs counter to good and counter to Love. We must be committed to remaining on the side of good and Love, rooting out in our own hearts those shards and shreds and shadows of the worst of us that both Love and Evil can elicit in us. Obviously being a follower of Jesus, a Christian, does not guarantee that we lead with our best. There are plenty of Christians in this world and country who sure seem to be having the worst called out in them right about now, with the depravity that's sitting high and bold out of the highest offices of our land right now... and some of us even if it's just in our passivity, are having the worst called out in us too. Sloth you know is one of the deadly sins, no less insidious than pride or wrath. Sloth could be considered a laziness to help because we are too comfortable.

But I don't want to leave us there. Let's go back here for an ending - to the call of Love, not the rampant nature of evil but the call of Love. That's why even the call of evil can elicit the best of us, because Love is so powerful a force in this world and we as Christians would say that Love is the source, the sustenance and the destination of this world, so obviously it's the most powerful of forces and will have the final say and if it doesn't, to adapt an often quoted phrase, if Love doesn't have the final say right now it's because it's not been finalized and more is still to be said.

Love calls out to us.

Are we hearing it?

What is it asking of us and calling out in us?

Can we catch it when the worst in us is being tweaked and triggered?

Can we allow our loved ones, our community, our friends to call us on the carpet when they sense the worst being triggered in us?

Can we think, and act and love from the True Self that is there in each of us, call it the Light of God Within or the Christ Within or The Angel of Our Highest Selves, such that we are willing to leave the entanglement of all our nets and follow Love wherever Love wants to take us?