

WHEN ENOUGH IS NOT ENOUGH

LUKE 5:1-11

The story of Jesus calling the first disciples beside the Lake of Gennesaret, or the Sea of Gaililee, is the stuff of cliché and cartoon. I do not know how many services I sat through as a youth in which this story was interpreted as a call to evangelize, to stand on a street corner or to go door-to-door in an effort to help a sinful world to have a psychic breakdown one person at a time until everybody thought and felt exactly the same things that the church did about every subject in heaven or on earth.

The notion of “catching people,” as Luke’s phrase is translated in the New Revised Standard Version, was enough to cause me to laugh under my breathe or out loud depending on how rebellious I was feeling. The language “catching people” conjures up images of faces with exaggerated features, puffed up cheeks, puckered up lips and a fishhook hanging out of some unrepentant sinner’s mouth.

I remember sitting in church and thinking, “Why would anybody to cast a line with a hook on the end of it in hopes that another human being would bite?” And let’s say, just for the sake of discussion, that one did want to reel in another person, what would he or she use for bait?

Obviously, this part of the story is not to be taken literally. Simon, James and John do not expect to catch people as they caught fish, but they are eager to share the power of their experience of Jesus Christ with others, and by “others,” I mean “others,” human beings whose experiences are unknown and mysterious, even strange to them. When Jesus brings their boats to shore, they leave everything and follow him.

Now this will preach, even in congregations that are allergic to and/or afraid of the word “evangelism.” Even if we are at a place theologically or philosophically where it is impossible to relate to our neighbors as objects of conversion, we still understand and affirm our call to serve God and neighbor as followers of Jesus Christ. In truth, I suspect that many of us do not “evangelize,” as the term

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is defined in the beginning of this sermon, because we recognize God's glory being made manifest in our neighbors regardless of where they go to church or if they go to church.

This story is a celebration of life and life in Christ for those who follow Jesus. It is not about dogma or institutions or any other graven image that human beings worship. It is about catching fish, because human beings are hungry. It is about being willing to set aside nets full of fish that are caught, because Jesus calls one elsewhere.

Remember where Jesus was a Sunday ago. He was in the synagogue proclaiming that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him, because he has been anointed to bring good news to the poor. He has been sent to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Beside the Sea of Galilee, isn't he doing much of the same? He is not standing in the synagogue but sitting in a boat. He is not reading from a scroll, but perhaps he fumbles with an oar as he speaks from his experiences, which now include casting out demons and healing Simon's mother-in-law. Jesus still preaches in Judea's synagogues, but he does not stay there. He does not wait for the poor to come to the synagogue to find him. He takes the Gospel to the poor. Yes, Simon is poor. James and John are poor, and it is not difficult to imagine them feeling captive to their work, work from which Jesus liberates them by the end of the story.

But I have to admit that I find humor in the way that Jesus does it. Remember how the story begins. Jesus steps into one of the boats and asks Simon to push him out. This helps him to see and be seen by every member of the crowd that has gathered, and it protects him from being mobbed. After Jesus says whatever he says to those gathered there, Jesus asks Simon to cast a net into deeper water. Notice that Luke emphasizes where Jesus is rather than what he says, and I suppose that I am sensitive to this, because the more that I parent and pastor, the more I understand and appreciate the value of

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showing up again and again and again, because it is in showing up that experiences are shared and relationships deepen or flourish (choose the verb that works best for you).

Now here's the humor. Simon is exhausted. He has fished and fished and now sat through Jesus' lecture, sermon and/or stump speech (sometimes it is difficult to differentiate one from the other). Simon is frustrated, because he has fished and fished, and still his nets are empty. By now, he knows enough about Jesus to trust him. Simon confesses Jesus as Lord saying, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." Jesus says so. Jesus says, "Enough is not enough. Fish again," and Simon obeys.

Simon obeys, and his nets are filled, but again, enough is not enough. The nets are not big enough to hold everything that the Lord gives to them. Those fishing in the other boat come to help, and enough is not enough. Both boats start sinking, and Simon is amazed and ashamed. He falls to his knees saying, "Go away. Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

At this point in the story, I have to stop and ask, "What does the weight of the fish symbolize for Simon?" What does it symbolize for you and me? Simon's nets and now his boat are running over, though not exactly like the psalmist's cup that runneth over in the Hebrew Scriptures. Does the weight of the fish symbolize God's abundance or Simon's sin? Or does it symbolize the weight of the oppression under which he labors?

Simon's partners James and John also are amazed. Did Jesus have Simon fishing for them before he knew what he was doing?

Suddenly, Jesus' power is palpable. It looks like sinking boats and jagged nets. It tastes like water and smells like fish. Simon, James and John are afraid, and Jesus reassures them saying, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

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Why does Jesus call them? Why does Jesus call us to catch people? Because human beings fall: Human beings are easily frustrated (some more easily than others). Human beings work and work sometimes without achieving what they would like to achieve, sometimes without earning enough money to make ends meet. Being captive to one's fears and frustrations is exhausting, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us and all peoples to be free.

This story often is referred to as "The Calling of the First Disciples," but please note that the call is more subtle in Luke's Gospel. Jesus states matter-of-factly, "from now on you will be catching people." There is no opt-out clause in this invitation. No, "follow me and fish for people." Jesus simply tells them what is coming next.

Peter Eaton, who serves as Dean of St. John's Cathedral in Denver, Colorado, concludes his commentary on this story by observing that, "So often the cost of discipleship does not come off the top; it is demanded of us after we have given everything that we can give. Jesus did not show up after a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast. He came to find these men at the end of a long working day, after backbreaking labor, and he told them to keep on working. He does the same to the preacher of this passage, and to all of us."

The work that God has given us to do at UPC is exhausting and scary at times. I pray that at the heart of all that we do is an earnest and honest desire to worship and serve a living God who will not be entrapped by the limits of dogmatism or institutionalism's lust for power. I pray that we will become more involved in taking good news to the poor, in proclaiming release to the captives and in letting the oppressed go free so that others will feel compelled to join us in this body. I pray that we will pray about, think about and feel our way through what evangelism looks like in this place and at this time. Inviting somebody to worship with us and welcoming them when they come through those doors is not the same as beating them over the head with a 25 lb. Bible and saying, "You have to be just like us." At

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times, being faithful to one's call means abandoning that which is familiar, facing one's fears and following Christ, for Christ's sake and not ours. If there is a more ambitious, gifted and colorful group of people in any church anywhere, I do not know who they are or where they are, but I do know this: If there is a cast of characters that is more ambitious, gifted and colorful than this one, then they should be the subject of a PBS special.

I give thanks for you regularly and pray for you regularly. Some Sundays, I look out, and I know that you are exhausted, and what do I do? I ask you to work (and this passage justifies my doing so), and yet, at the same time, as a Minister of Word and Sacrament, I also am obliged to remind you again and again that Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." And I do so, because this is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is at the heart to God to whom we belong in life and in death. To the God of all grace, who calls you to share God's eternal glory in union with Christ, be the power forever! Amen.

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