

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany 2010

Dan Clendenin, an Evangelical Presbyterian scholar, writes that the upshot of these three stories in our Scriptures for today is that human sin, failure, and inadequacy were not obstacles to God's call. God doesn't require a perfect messenger for the message.

Consider for a moment Isaiah, Paul, or Simon, called Peter. For each of them embracing rather than denying their human weakness is the path of liberation and not their humiliation. It's an act of self-awareness and not self-hatred. By embracing our fallenness, as Clendenin writes, "we move from illusion and self-justification to reality and self-acceptance."

In our most honest moments of self-awareness, we can still offer ourselves to God as did Isaiah, "Here am I, send me." Without hedging our bets or adding contingency clauses, we can imitate the disciples who "pulled their boats up on shore, left everything, and followed Jesus." We can rejoice with Paul that "by the grace of God I am what I am." Most important of all, to Isaiah's dread, Paul's deep regrets and painful memories, Peter's fears, and to our own deeply personal insecurities today, God whispers to us what Jesus said to Peter: "Don't be afraid" (Luke 5:10).

Before we sing a favorite hymn by George Herbert, I would like to share some words of our first female Native American bishop. In contrast to Herbert's birth to wealth and privilege, birth as a Native American often brought the challenges of being from a people with no privilege and a woman as well.

Bishop Carol Gallagher recalls from her childhood as a Native American, if someone was asked to return something he had been given to use for awhile, other kids would call that person an "Indian giver." From my own childhood, I knew how painful it is to be called an Indian giver. To a little American Indian girl, these words were even more hurtful, because they meant her people were shameful and not generous.

Later she came to find out that the term "Indian giver" arose out of an incredibly generous gesture that was completely misunderstood. Many Native communities that

encountered the first European settlers had communal stores of furs, food and other essentials that were held in common and shared as need arose. When the first settlers arrived from Europe, and were struggling for survival, Native people shared these resources with them. When the settlers seemed to be recovering and managing on their own, then the items were reclaimed in order that they could be shared with others in need. What was meant to teach a new way to do things in this new world became misinterpreted as selfishness. What was meant as an outpouring of hospitality and welcome was misunderstood to be a lack of generosity.

George Herbert, 17th century preacher and poet, unlike Carol, was born to wealth and political power. Yet God changed his life too. After graduation from Cambridge, Herbert distinguished himself as the university's Public Orator and a Member of Parliament. At the age of thirty-six, and despite the objections of friends that he was wasting his life, Herbert renounced his life of privilege and became the pastor at Bemerton, a small rural village near Salisbury, England. In Bemerton he preached, served the pastoral needs of his people with loving distinction, cared for the poor, and helped to rebuild the church using his own resources. Four years later, a month before his fortieth birthday, Herbert died of tuberculosis. Were those four years wasted? That is a decision we need to make for ourselves. Perhaps if he had not cared for the poor, he would not have died? These may be our questions or the questions of his friends but they were not his.

Herbert wrote poetry, although none of his poems were published when he died. Upon his deathbed he asked his friend Nicholas Ferrar to publish them only if they might help “any dejected poor soul.” In death, his poems became an enormous success. What attracts many readers to Herbert's poetry is not only their literary elegance but his vivid depictions of his lifelong struggles between his privileged background, his worldly ambitions, his deep sense of inadequacy, and our own unconditional embrace by a loving God. Herbert saw what we are invited to see. What Isaiah, Peter, and Paul came to see is the presence of God in each of us.

In the Gospel we find that generosity and discovering new ways of seeing and doing are the marks of Christ's presence in our lives. To say that the fishermen disciples were having a bad day would be an understatement. The normal practices of their lives were interrupted. Jesus entered their lives and offered a unique approach to their problem. And right away they argued as to what this could mean.

Jesus' presence brought them the power of a living God but it also required a change from them. Their old understandings would have to give way to new and different interpretations. Their world, which had been very confined and ordered, was now expanded and chaotic. This stranger came in their midst bringing the challenges of inclusion and creativity, which are attributes and expressions of God's presence.

Jesus came to people and changed their whole interpretation of generosity. He showed the disciples that new ways and new relationships were being formed. Their work would be so expanded that fishing would include risking nets to uncharted seas and drawing strangers and even enemies into the embrace of God in Christ Jesus.

The disciples had the opportunity to either engage a new way of being with Christ or turn away and be insulted by that invitation and generosity. We have the same opportunity -- to embrace or turn away. The promise of the Gospel is that there will be plenty of fish, plenty of innovation, plenty of room for all if we will but reach to the other side. If we will reach to include, if we will stretch to expand our understanding, if we will but take enemies and strangers as part of our loving family of God, then we will surely participate in the abundance and the blessing as expressed in the words of George Herbert in your Hymnal # 382 "King of Glory, King of Peace."