

Sermon for February 7, 2010

FISHING WITH JESUS

A minister, one night, was driving his car down the highway in the midst of a winter storm. The conditions were awful. The snow was blowing and it was bitterly cold. As he slowed to turn off on his exit, he noticed a semi-truck stopped on the shoulder, and its driver trying to replace a flat tire. So, the minister stopped to see if he could offer any assistance to the poor driver, not imagining that he could do much other than give him some encouragement.

When he stepped out of his car, and approached the driver, he heard him swearing a blue streak. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Can I be of any help to you? I'm the pastor of a church just down the road and would be happy to make a call or whatever?" The trucker replied in a gruff voice, "No preacher, the only problem is that I can't get this one blankety-blank lug nut off, and I've tried everything." The minister, almost surprising himself, blurted out, "Well, have you tried prayer?" "No, answered the trucker, "but what the hell, nothing else has worked." So the trucker bowed his head and entered into a moment of silent meditation, which he concluded with an audible, "Amen!" He applied the wrench to the lug nut again, and it came off as slick as you please. To which the preacher replied, "Well I'll be damned!"

We are always a bit stunned, and frightened really, when faith in Jesus accomplishes amazing things. It forces us to admit that there is more going on in our world than we think, that reality is more than we see and touch, and that God is really with us. It's this last assertion that frightens us, because if God is really with us, then we have a lot to answer for.

Our gospel story this morning is about Simon Peter, that truck-driver kind of disciple, and his call to discipleship. Jesus, after the debacle in his hometown, is now drawing huge crowds. On the shore of Lake Gennesaret, the throng is so great that to avoid being pushed into the water, Jesus commandeers Peter's boat as a floating pulpit. When his sermon is ended, he wants to offer Peter something by way of thanks for lending him the boat, so he says, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Peter's answer is as condescending as it is polite. He's a professional fisherman after all. "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing." But Jesus must have given him a look, or else the sermon was awfully good, because Peter has a second thought, and suddenly acquiesces. "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." In truth, he had no more confidence in this preacher's ability to fish than that trucker had in prayer to loosen that lug nut, but like the trucker he said to himself, "What the hell, nothing else has worked." So to humor Jesus, he and his comrades launched their boats again and dropped their nets, and the catch of fish was more than they could handle, to the point of ripping their nets apart. When Peter saw it, he said to himself, "Well I'll be damned!"

Then it hits Peter, like a bolt of lightning, that he may, in fact, be damned! Maybe this guy Jesus is exactly who he claims to be, God's anointed servant. Maybe he is standing in the very presence of the Messiah himself. No, not maybe, but truly! This *is* the Messiah. And suddenly Peter is afraid, very afraid, because he has a lot to answer for. He doubted Jesus and didn't take his message seriously. So he falls to his knees and blurts out, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinner.” It’s the first reaction of anyone who is overcome by God’s grace. Paul shares the same experience of unworthiness in his letter to the Christians in Corinth when he writes, “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” Paul, the proud and self-righteous Pharisee, when he was overcome by God’s grace on the road to Damascus, knew he had a lot to answer for.

I know the feeling, because that same sense of unworthiness delayed me from embracing my own call to ministry. I didn’t trust that Jesus knew what he was doing, and couldn’t imagine why he would call me. My faith was adequate for me, but I didn’t think it was adequate to preach the gospel, or to lead a congregation. “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinner.” And I know that each of you has had similar feelings at one time or another. To encounter the Lord and his grace, and to be a recipient of his life-giving, life-renewing, life-resurrecting, messianic power, is scary stuff, because we have a lot to answer for, and we don’t really want to change.

To Peter, to Paul, to me, and to you, Jesus replies, “Do not be afraid. I am not here to judge you, or to change you. I’m here to love you and all those whom God made. I’m here to proclaim and demonstrate God’s good news. But I need your help. I can’t do it alone. Will you help me? Will you be a colleague with me in ministry? Will you join me in catching people for the kingdom of heaven?”

We know how Peter, and the two sons of Zebedee answered. “When they had brought their boats to shore they left everything and followed him (Luke 5:11).” We know how Paul answered. “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me (I Cor. 15:10).” And people in all walks of life, of different abilities and talents, have been answering Christ’s call ever since, signing on to fish with Jesus for people.

I heard a speaker at a workshop for funeral directors and clergy remind us “You can’t take it with you.” He said, “You’ve never seen a hearse driving to the cemetery pulling a trailer filled with cash and belongings.” “But,” he said, “there is one thing that you can take with you, and that’s people.” Jesus himself said, “I go to prepare a place for you. And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, that where I am you may be also.” Jesus is always casting a net for people, to bring them up from the deep waters of ignorance and fear, onto the shore of heaven’s blessed expanse. But he needs our help to pull in the net. “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be fishing for people.”

If this is all true, and we know it is, then why aren’t we better at it? Why is our catch for the kingdom so pitiful? Why aren’t we straining to haul in our nets? Our church, for instance, has remained at its present size for a long time. Why don’t we grow? I’m thankful, frankly, that in today’s religious market and cultural climate that we haven’t declined. But why don’t we grow? They say that churches that don’t grow don’t really want to, that they are afraid of change. But I don’t think that’s it. I think the problem is that we aren’t really fishing with Jesus; we are fishing by ourselves. When we fish by ourselves, trusting in our own abilities, we catch nothing more than our daily limit, and sometimes not even that.

Peter and his partners were professionals just like us, and despite fishing all night, they had nothing to show for it. But then, Jesus, invited them to try again with him on board. When they went fishing with Jesus, they caught more than they ever dreamed of.

I’m not entirely sure what it means to fish with Jesus, because it’s an inexhaustible concept, as inexhaustible in thought and practice as is his grace. But at the very least I think it means this. It means trusting, with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, that Jesus can accomplish what he says he can. It means trusting, that he is the way, the truth, and the life, God’s beloved son. It means trusting that in him all things were made, and that in him all things are possible. It means believing that if we ask it in his name, it will be given us, and not in small

measure but pressed down and overflowing. It means knowing that where we have failed, Jesus can and will succeed. It means devoting ourselves, hook, line, and sinker, to what Jesus tells us, even if it sounds foolish. And it means becoming his disciples, his disciplined followers, who speak and live to his glory.

Peter, who went on from that day in his boat to become the first and most pre-eminent disciple of Jesus Christ, was an unlikely hero. But he heard Jesus preach, and he heard Jesus ask him to trust in him. Like you and me, he had doubts. If he couldn't catch any fish after an entire night of labor, how could Jesus? But then, he took a chance, and let down his nets, because Jesus, God's anointed, said to do it. The rest is history, a history that is still in the making.

Are you fishing with Jesus? That's the question, the only question, that really matters on the shores of heaven. Are you fishing with Jesus?

PRAYER: Almighty and most loving God, may we be those persons who respond to Jesus call, who trust in him, and follow him, and serve him, for the sake of the glory that is your kingdom. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

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Luke 5:1-11