

Sermon for FPC Gardena – Sunday February 7, 2010

Luke 5:1-11

Luke tells the story of Jesus and the disciples a bit differently than the other gospel writers. According to Luke, this early encounter with Simon and James and John served as an introduction between Jesus and the fishermen (note that Andrew is not mentioned by name in Luke's version). It would only be later that Jesus would gather his followers and appoint the twelve apostles. Yet in this brief passage, Jesus evokes obedience, awe, faith, confession, and loyalty from these fishermen.

These men were seasoned fishermen. It was work that they had learned from their fathers, who had learned it from their fathers before them. It was demanding physical work, but it provided both food as well as income, for the fish they caught could be both eaten and sold. It was unlikely that Simon, James, John, or any other of the fishermen there on the lake of Gennesaret had ever dreamed of or even considered another way of life. Fishing was in their very blood.

These fishermen used nets which they had crafted from linen. This material made the nets invisible in the water during the dark hours of the night. The fish couldn't see the nets they were swimming into—until suddenly they found themselves caught and gathered with entire schools of fish, headed for shore in gigantic nets.

But through this particular night, these fishermen had caught not a single fish. They would have been tired from a night on the water, and probably rather despondent that they had nothing to show for it. Still, the nets needed to be washed and prepared for the next night of fishing. And so the men left their boats and went about washing the nets. At first they were distracted by their work and didn't notice the man climbing into their vacant boat. But when the man called to Simon and asked him to put the boat a little ways out from shore, Simon left his task and complied.

From Simon's boat, Jesus proceeded to speak to the gathered crowds on the shore, teaching them about the community of God, and about God's great love for all people. Along with the crowds, Simon and the other fishermen would have heard all that Jesus had to say.

They must have been surprised, though, when Jesus had finished teaching and he asked Simon and his comrades to put his boat out to deep water and let down the nets for a catch. It was daytime by then, and with the sun overhead, the nets would have been easily visible to the fish, making the possibility of a catch even less likely. It didn't make a whole lot of sense, this suggestion of Jesus', but something about him—perhaps the teachings he had just shared—compelled Simon and his friends to do what Jesus asked. Simon had made it clear to Jesus that they had fished all night without catching a single fish, but he agreed to do as Jesus asked.

And so they returned to the same deep water where they had fished unsuccessfully through the night, and they cast their nets back into the water. Simon's obedience was not in vain, for when they let down the nets they had a catch like no other. Their nets were so full and so heavy that they had to signal to James and John to bring their boat out to help them haul in the amazing catch of fish. There were so many that both of the boats threatened to sink under their weight. Somehow, they got their boats and the fish back to the shore where they met Jesus.

All of the fishermen were overcome with awe at what had occurred. They could scarcely believe their eyes when they looked at the bounty of fish they had just hauled in. But it was Simon's initial obedience and now his awe that ignited in him a new faith. He recognized Jesus' power, fell on his knees before Jesus, and confessed his unworthiness to be in Jesus' presence, referring to himself as 'a sinful man'. And Jesus instantly proclaimed Simon forgiven, and stated that he had a plan for Simon's life.

All these things took place there on the familiar beach beside Gennesaret, where just hours before the fishermen had been desperate for a catch of even a few fish. And now, they had more fish than they knew what to do with, and they had experienced this amazing encounter with Jesus, which had inspired them to obedience, awe, faith, and confession, and then with an invitation from Jesus.

It had to be getting on toward noon by this time, and the fishermen had at least four times as many fish as they might after an average night. Clearly, the next thing for them to do would be to get busy cleaning the fish, preparing them for sale. But, on this most surprising day, Jesus had still other plans for them. In response to Simon's confession, Jesus replied, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

This was not the invitation we recall from some of the other gospels, "Follow me." No, it was more like a statement of fact—Jesus knew who these men were and who they were to become. And sure enough, they left everything—their boats, their huge catch of fish, their homes, their plans for that day and the days beyond—and they followed him! It seems that the results of hearing Jesus address the crowds and seeing the miracle of the fish had not only evoked obedience, awe, faith, and confession, but also loyalty and a desire to learn more about Jesus and to hear more about God. And so, they walked away from the greatest catch of their lives—to follow Jesus.

Perhaps Simon, James, and John reflected on the words spoken by the prophet Jeremiah to the captives in Babylon long before, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." For they left all that was familiar and followed in trust. Page 4

While Jesus knew the plans he had for these fishermen, “to catch people,” they would have had absolutely no idea what he meant. But something—his words from the boat, his teaming up with them that morning, the miracle of the catch—something touched them deeply that morning, and changed the course of their lives.

Simon responded willingly to each of Jesus’ requests—to move the boat out to deeper water while he addressed the crowds, and then to take the boat out even further and to cast the nets there in the daylight. Something about Jesus inspired Simon to obedience. I think we can safely say that this ‘something’ was the presence of God.

What inspires us to live in obedience to God? And how do we discern what it is God is asking of us in the first place? Do we rely on gut instinct? Or on certain forms of prayer? Are we guided by the scriptures? Or by other people of faith? The answer may be different for each of us, but it is a question worth pondering. What does the Lord require of us? And what prompts us to respond?

Simon, James, John, and all who were with them were amazed at the catch of the fish they had taken. The nets which had yielded nothing the previous night were now filled to overflowing. This miracle of abundance left them awestruck. These common fishermen were absolutely awed by God’s generosity.

What evokes such awe in us? What are the events, the circumstances, the acts of God which draw us to express our gratitude, our amazement, our wonder at God's power and God's goodness? Give this some thought. Spend some time considering those moments when you have been completely overwhelmed by the power and majesty of God.

Simon was so overwhelmed by the awesome miracle of the abundant catch that he fell to his knees in faith before Jesus. In the midst of this, he recognized Jesus as Lord. There was no uncertainty in Simon at this moment. He *knew*, from what he had heard and what he had seen, that Jesus was Lord, worthy of his obedience, his worship, and his gratitude.

Think about those moments in your own life when you have experienced such deep certainty of faith. Even if faith is a constant with you, there must be events which have the power to reaffirm your faith and to renew your relationship with Christ. For Simon, it was a miracle. For us it may be something equally amazing, or it may be a part of our simple, everyday lives which speaks to us and calls us to a deeper and more absolute faith.

For Simon, such an experience of faith called him to confession. He recognized the power of God in Jesus and acknowledged his own unworthiness before him. Page 6

Are there moments in our own lives when we are genuinely humbled by God's goodness? When we must be honest with ourselves and with God regarding our own misdeeds, our own areas of insufficiency? And in such moments, are we brave and humble enough to confess our shortcomings before our God with contrition, and a willingness to start anew? Such spontaneous confession opens the way to a deeper relationship with God.

With Simon and the other fishermen, all of these experiences—of obedience, awe, faith, and confession—led them to a sense of loyalty to Jesus. While they may not have known what he meant by 'catching people', they understood that he had something in mind for them, and their newly kindled faith translated into their following a sense of call to follow him, though they knew not where he was going.

What is it about Jesus that inspires—or could inspire—such loyalty in us? Is it the awe that we sense in Christ's presence? Is it the faith that is strengthened by his teachings and his everyday miracles? Is it a commitment to obedience on our parts? Is it the honesty and humility that Jesus evokes in us? Perhaps it is each of these things, combined, which create a pull that is so strong that we simply cannot resist the opportunity or the call to follow Jesus.

Perhaps this is something we each need to consider and pray about ourselves. P. 7

Today, we have the great privilege of enacting both sacraments of the church. We will participate in a baptism and then we will share the Lord's Supper. In each of these sacraments, there is space for obedience, for awe, for faith, for confession, and for deepened loyalty to Christ.

As we enter into these two sacred practices, let us open our hearts and our minds to the mysterious and awesome presence of Christ in and among us. And let us allow these sacraments to draw us into the questions we have raised this morning—so that we might come to understand our faith better, to practice our faith more intently, and to love and trust our God more deeply. Amen.

Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.