
Homily from Luke 5:1-11

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Luke tells us that Jesus was being pressed by yet another crowd of people (although, unlike the crowds in last week's Gospel, these folks weren't trying to throw Jesus off a cliff). They didn't yet know just who he was but they had surely heard of his miracles and teaching. They were crowding around him to hear the word of God.

The story of Jesus' ministry to this point has him preaching and teaching in the Temple. This is the first account of Jesus going out among the people, into the streets, meeting them where they were and entering into their everyday lives.

Jesus gets into Peter's boat, summons him and asked him to put out a ways from shore so the people could gather on the shore and listen to him.

After speaking, he told Peter to go out to the deep water and let down his nets for a catch. Now, Peter and his partners had already finished a very hard day's work and like many of us who have tried our hand at fishing, he had come up empty. They had already washed their nets in preparation for the next day and were surely exhausted, disappointed and ready to just give it up for the day. But Peter, in an act of obedience says, OK, if you say so I'll do it. Nothing more than that, just simple obedience to Jesus.

I certainly have times when I am totally worn out, tired of fighting with airline schedules, security lines, bad hotel food, cancelled reservations, customers who demand more than I can ever hope to deliver, and at the end of those days there is always something like a plumbing emergency awaiting me at home. It is specifically in those times that I hope Jesus doesn't call me and ask me to do even more before I rest! There are times when I hope the ringing phone isn't one of my clergy colleagues asking me to do something right away. It won't surprise you that when the call comes and I'm required to stretch just a bit more before the end of the day, God always seems to bless those efforts. Sometimes it is the blessing of holding the hand of a very sick person. Sometimes it is the blessing of sharing a meal with the homeless and sometimes it is the blessing of entering into another's sadness and grief. I believe those blessings are indeed as great as a fisherman's boat overflowing with fish. I admit that I only recognize some blessings in hindsight but they are always there. I would suggest that it is in the times when we have given ourselves over to worldly problems and done everything we can to control our lives that we are most likely to be pressed into the work of living out the Gospel.

Acting on Jesus' command, the nets are raised and are overfilled with fish. So many that another boat is needed to hold the catch.

Needless to say, the fishermen were astonished and certainly had to have a feeling of discomfort and uncertainty, as one would expect after witnessing a miracle.

Peter's response to the miracle of abundance was to protest that he is unworthy because he is a sinful man.

In today's Old Testament reading, Isaiah is in the presence of God and is being called by God to take a message to God's people. Isaiah protests and says "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!".

Both Isaiah and Peter feel the magnitude of their unworthiness. A seraph cleanses Isaiah lips with a burning coal and Jesus has a cleansing word for Peter.

Whatever troubled their hearts was let go as God set them on a new course and empowered them for new work in the kingdom.

Peter, James, John and others leave everything they have and follow Jesus. They dropped everything they were doing, walked away from their possessions and families and followed Jesus. This surely made more sense in the times when miracles and the supernatural were simply assumed to be but I think that it was probably a stretch, even then. In the days of Jesus, miracles were also signs of divine power of which the true importance lay not in the events themselves but in what they might signify.

Matthew and Mark recall the event and do not include the miracle of the fish catch. The disciple's response is probably easier for us to accept if we include the miracle but their action is nonetheless an act of freewill made in faith and obedience to Jesus

That, of course, begs the questions; what do we have to leave behind to follow Jesus and what have we failed to leave behind to follow Jesus.

About 5 years ago a very successful attorney from Atlanta was sitting on the cloister porch at a monastery in New York . He had just spent three days in prayer, and quiet listening for God. He made a decision at that time to leave his comfort zone of high income, recognition in the legal community, power and prestige and enter seminary. He was ordained Deacon in this place in December and will be ordained Priest later this year. God said "follow me" and in faith and obedience, this man did exactly that. There was a special blessing for me in all of that because I was sitting next to him on the cloister porch when he made and announced his decision.

Agnes Bojaxhiu was born in Macedonia in 1910. At the tender age of 12 she strongly felt the call of God and knew she was called to spread the love of Jesus Christ. At age 18 she entered a convent and joined the sisters of Loreto. While teaching at a high school in Calcutta she was so moved by the extreme poverty she saw from her window that she sought and received permission to work among the poorest of poor in the slums. The story of her work became well known to all because this woman we know as Mother Theresa continued to obediently answer God's call to serve God's people until her death.

I know there are thousands of stories about people who have received calls to radical vocation and there is assuredly no logical or rational explanation. But the fact is, God calls us to follow him today just as certainly as Jesus called Peter, James and John. Now, I am not suggesting you run away to a monastery, enroll in seminary or fly over to Calcutta and work in the slums (although all are worthy of consideration).

The important thing is to recognize is that God's work of calling did not stop with the Gospel stories. God's calling to us continues to this day. God's call to us is not an invitation! It is not "hey, y'all wanna come over here?" God's call throughout history is one of command; sometimes subtle and gentle and sometimes violent. God has already "ordered" things so the "call" is just one more piece in God's puzzle. That was surely the case with Peter, James and John. When Jesus commanded them to follow him, the events surrounding their lives had already been perfectly ordered to support their obedient response.

Just as Jesus involved himself in Peter's everyday concerns about fishing, God calls to each of us in our ordinary everyday lives and asks that we follow Him. Sometimes that call is to radical vocation and sometimes it is a call to feed God's sheep right where we are, in our families, at our work, in our church and in our communities.

Jesus' behavior and actions provide the perfect model for us. He went out among the people, into the street, where they lived, worked, experienced joy and sorrow --- all of the messiness of their lives.

As for us, how do we respond? Did a homeless person appear before us this week as a reminder? I was approached by a panhandler on Peachtree Road recently and I admit to feeling very uncomfortable - maybe a little bit scared. I know what I am called to do and I confess to you that I did not respond to that call. Perhaps my faith was at a low point or perhaps I had once more replaced God's will with my own. In any event, I mumbled something about not having any money and moved on at an accelerated pace. I wish I had simply said I wasn't able to give him any money and offered a prayer, but I didn't.

What I've learned is that following God's call is not a single event, it is a life long process filled with much failure punctuated with occasional bright points of success

God's call to follow can be as subtle as something that moves us to ask questions or it can be very dramatic. It can be the pain and agony suffered by hurricane victims that spurred this parish to compassionate action in August of 2005.

I am convinced that we are called to continue Jesus' ministry to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and to let the oppressed go free. If we have a blessing of wealth, power and prestige, we are called to use those blessings to continue Jesus' ministry. If we have the beautiful blessings of poverty and humble life we are called to use those blessings to continue Jesus' ministry.

The message in Luke's Gospel is not so much one of acceptance of, or recognition of a call, it is one of obedience. A call to discipleship is something that God has both commanded and enabled.

As the story of Jesus' ministry unfolds we see that his work and ministry have grown to require the recruitment of disciples. After his death, the growth of his church requires many workers in the vineyards, the apostles, the seven chosen to serve, St. Paul, Barnabas, the men of Cyprus and Cyrene and millions more over the ages.

You see, the fishing for people continues. God has chosen to work through we human beings, we vessels of clay and because God has chosen to work this way, it is crucial that we be alert to God's call and obedient in response to that call.

Amen

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