

Follow Me and I will make You Fishers of People!

Luke 5:1-11 February 5/6, 2010

When the early Christians were hiding in the catacombs, they would greet each other with the words, "Christ is risen." Paul might wonder why Christians in the 21st century do not practice this greeting more often.

Christ is risen means first of all, that Christ has died. In the death of Jesus, God faced the very worst this world has to give, the very depths of brokenness. This means that nothing, not one thing we'll ever experience, will be outside the experience of our God. No matter what darkness we experience in this life, God is already there. God knows our deepest anguish, our loneliest sorrow, even our pain and death.

But what is more, God doesn't just know them. God engages them in the death of Jesus. God enters into the very depths to do battle with our enemies, with sin, death, and the devil. And in the resurrection of Christ, we receive the firstfruits of victory-the fruits of forgiveness and new life.

Each time we proclaim the forgiveness of sins, we are preaching the resurrection, the raising up from death to life. Perhaps at times it's enough simply to say. "God loves you. God welcomes you." But at times we need something stronger. Perhaps if we just hear that God loves us, we respond, "Yeah, you say you love me, God, but if you really knew me, you wouldn't. If you knew my thoughts deep down, you wouldn't really love me." But God does know us, and God says something unambiguous to us, "I see it all and I love you still. I see it all and I love you enough to come in resurrection power to forgive you, to heal you from the inside out."

But the good news, Christ is risen, is not just about me, it's not just about my comfort and forgiveness. Christ is risen means that Christ is alive, at work in the world today. The most important question concerning Jesus, then, is simply this: "Do we think he is dead or alive." And if he's alive then he's here at work. Oh, before his death, Jesus, like all humans, was limited in his power to reach others, to touch others. But now as the risen and ascended Lord, he's no longer bound by time and space. His power can reach into any corner of the world, any corner of our lives. At the same time the New Testament is clear that, though the risen Lord can be anywhere at any time, there are some places where he has promised to be: in the bread and wine, his body and blood; in the Word as it is preached and taught, in the waters of Baptism as it joins us to Christ; in the community of Faith in what the NT has the audacity to call the body of the risen Lord; and finally in the little ones of earth. As the King says in the final judgment, whenever you feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, visit the prisoner, comfort the sick, whenever you serve the least of these, you are serving me.

Christ is risen! Christ is alive! I've come to appreciate the Benedictine wisdom that suggests at the end of the day, we're faced with just two questions, really: Did I see the living Christ in other people? And did others see the living Christ in me? At the end of the day, we ask ourselves, did I live this day in the confidence that Christ is alive? Did I treat others with the kind of love and respect I would show to Christ? Did other people see Christ alive in me- in my words and deeds?

The call of the first disciples is one of the few Gospel stories that is recorded in every Gospel. Jesus simply invites the disciples to follow and that is what they do. Peter, Andrew, James and John, drop everything to follow Jesus: fish and fishing nets, boats and hired men, they even leave their father Zebedee. All left behind.

Of the Synoptic accounts, Luke provides the most detail. Like Gideon, Isaiah, and Paul whose expressions of unworthiness are recorded in other texts-Simon Peter also admits his sinfulness in the face of Jesus' power.

Though Jesus has already been to Simon's house (recall Jesus' healing of Simon's mother in law (Luke 4), this abundant provision of fish opens Simon's eyes to the divine power at work. This is an epiphany call story.

The common elements are present: A person is at work, usually at their everyday tasks. God's presence is revealed in a remarkable way; the person recognizes their sin in relationship to the holy God; and God calls them to a mission, promising to provide what they need in settings that look absolutely despairing and dead. Jesus responds to Simon Peter by saying, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." This is the same assurance given to Moses, Gideon, and Isaiah: "Do not be afraid."

So the miracle of fish gives way to the greater miracle of Simon Peter's response: "When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him." What evokes such a response? Why do these fishermen leave their livelihood, their father and everything they've ever known? They leave in response to Jesus. They are drawn into a glimpse of the reign of God, a reign of power and justice and mercy, a reign of extravagant welcome and unconditional love. They see something in Jesus, something worth dropping everything to know and receive.

Jesus invites, and the disciples drop everything and go. We receive such an invitation in the waters of Baptism. Jesus calls us by name and commissions us as disciples. And it is this relationship that defines and shapes everything. It is this relationship with Christ into which we bring every decision, every option, every choice. We may not drop everything, leaving fishnets and boats on the shore. But we will measure everything we do in relationship to our fundamental calling to follow Jesus.

The witness of these fishermen reminds us that, prior to any other calling in our lives or any other vocation, we are called to follow Jesus, to live as his disciples, serving the poor and outcast, making disciples of all nations, hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Whatever we choose for work, whatever we choose for volunteer activities, somehow we need to consider how it fits with our first calling, our calling to follow Christ.

But there is more in this text. These disciples also agree to follow Jesus in inviting others into a relationship with him. And sometimes that may seem like a more radical activity. It is one thing to follow Jesus, but does it have to include fishing for others?

First of all we get stuck on the fishing metaphor. For most of us it evokes a hook and a line, an image of snatching people for the kingdom. It seems forced and coercive. But fishing with a net redeems. And for Peter, James and John that was how fishing was done. The calling is not to hook people and drag them in. It is rather to cast the net of God's love all around-open to all the world-and then wait with patience for the Spirit's

work and to see if any are caught by God's vision and grace. And it happens in unusual places and lack of any signs, in the deeps of life.

In weekly worship, we are reminded that the net of Jesus' gracious love has been cast anew in our midst-and each person here today is welcomed anew into the loving embrace of God. In weekly worship, we are given new strength and vision that we might share that love with others.

I close with the casting of God's net in an unusual place and time.

Just over one hundred years ago, Adolph Hitler was born. In his 56 years on the planet he did incredible harm, and was responsible for millions of death. Yet in the midst of deep horror that he unleashed, there are pinpoints of light and nobility and God's net of love is shown.

A German soldier, Private Joseph Schultz, was once such a pinpoint of light. He was sent to Yugoslavia shortly after the invasion. He was a loyal young German soldier on patrol, and the sergeant called out 8 names; his was among them. They thought they were going out on patrol, and as they hitched up their rifles, they came over the hill, still not knowing what their mission was.

What they saw was 8 Yugoslavians. It was only when they got about 50 feet from them, when any marksman could shoot out the eyes of a pheasant that the soldiers realized what their mission was

The 8 soldiers were lined up. The sergeant barked out "ready" and they lifted up their rifles. "Aim." And they got their sights. And suddenly in the silence that prevailed, there was a thud of a rifle butt against the ground. The sergeant, and the other 7 soldiers and the 8 Yugoslavians, stopped and looked. And Private Joseph Shultz walked toward the Yugoslavians. The sergeant called after him and ordered him to come back, but he pretended not to hear him. Instead he walked the 50 feet to the mound of the hill, and he joined hands with the 8 Yugoslavians.

There was a moment of silence, than the sergeant yelled, "Fire!" And Private Joseph Schultz died, mingling his blood with those innocent men and women. Later found on his body was an excerpt from St. Paul: "Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices in the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres" (First Corinthians 13:6-7). Private Schultz launched out into the deep. And a short movie was made about Private Schultz and that specific event. Who knows what impact that one act has had on people around the world. But I think God used that event to bring people to being caught in his net and made alive, to follow him, and that is what he is doing for us today.

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