



Sermons from

“Hearing God’s Call”

The Rev. Evans L McGowan

October 16, 2011

Twenty-nineth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 5: 1-11

Today we continue our month of stewardship by studying our litany charge:

“We are a community,

Gathered in faith.

Hearing God’s call,

We share God’s grace.”

In the past two weeks we have looked at what it means to be a community, and to what extent we have gathered here in faith. Today we hear God’s call, first in Isaiah and then in Luke. How might we also hear God’s call in our own lives, that we may be able to share God’s grace with others?

Let us pray.

God – Our Rock and our Redeemer - you call out to us from the depths of woe and amidst the ho-hum of our day. May we hear your loving call, and respond in kind. Amen.

Last Sunday I was in Wilmington, Delaware, getting ordained at my home congregation of Westminster Presbyterian Church. It was a very special occasion, with my mom – also a pastor – praying over me and placing on my shoulders my ordination stole. Family and friends were there to witness this most joyous event. And now the journey begins as a Resident Minister here in this church, as I continue to seek out God’s call... and respond.

While not all of us are ordained in such an official position, we believe that God calls each person according to his or her unique situation and gifts. How do we respond to God’s call? Or maybe we should back up and ask: What does God’s call look like?

Turning to our reading today, let us listen to how Peter responds to God’s call in his particular situation. Maybe something new is breaking into your life. Or maybe, like Peter, you’re keeping to a routine, minding your own business, when God comes a-calling.

The crowds are pressing in on Jesus. They want more of him. It’s almost looks like he’s looking for a way out when he spots two boats on the shoreline. Some fishermen nearby are cleaning their nets, hard at work on this otherwise ho-hum day. Jesus convinces one of them, Simon, to stop what he’s doing and take him a little way out from the shore. Simon agrees – perhaps because all these

people all around; perhaps because he wants to listen, too; or perhaps this man needs his help: It's not like this carpenter from Nazareth can command a boat, much less the sea!

After a while, Jesus finishes teaching and preaching about the Word of God. Now he turns to Simon and tells him to put out into deep water and let down his nets for catch.

Simon is not overly enthused: "Master, we have worked *all night long* but have caught **nothing**. Yet if **you say so**, I will let down the nets."

First, Simon uses the word "Master" (Gk: *epistata*) – a word of respect but also distinction. It's a word that says, "you are not one of us, and probably don't have a clue about fishing." Simon goes on to point out that they had fished all night and had caught nothing. Surely Jesus had seen Simon and his partners hard at work cleaning the nets, signaling they were done for the day. Casting their nets meant they would have to start cleaning again all over. And for what? The fish would see the net in broad daylight and be scared off.

After making his point that this is a crazy and inconvenient request, Simon then agrees to do as Jesus says. *Why?* One clue is that this isn't the first time he and Jesus have met. Just a few verses earlier, Jesus had come to Peter's house and healed his mother-in-law from a fever. He then had stayed the night, with the whole neighborhood coming over at dusk to receive healing. Peter knows Jesus' words carry tremendous power, and here he has asked Peter to do something. So Peter will do it, but let it be known that it's a crazy and inconvenient request. Perhaps Peter was being faithful, or perhaps he was thinking – "You're aren't catching me with your words, Jesus, and you sure aren't going to catch any fish."

But there *was* a catch. A crazy **big** one that required another boat to help. Peter, ever confident he didn't need Jesus to tell him how to fish, now can't do it alone. He needs help, just as Jesus will need Peter's help to spread the Word of God's Kingdom coming.

With the boats in danger of sinking, Peter falls to Jesus' feet (and probably on top of a whole lot of fish!) and cries: Thank you!? Or: Wow, Jesus, I didn't know you had it in you!? No, he cries: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Crowds can't get enough of him, he's responsible for Peter's biggest catch in his life, and here Peter tells Jesus to go away. Again, why?

Peter had staked out what he believed: Jesus isn't going to catch him or any fish with his words. But now that the fish were caught, Peter realizes he is caught, too. In the Hebrew Scriptures, getting caught or gathered up by God meant judgment was a-coming (Amos 4:2; Hab. 1:14-15; Jer. 16:16). The unexpected had happened, and Peter had no other explanation than to fall to his knees and call Jesus "Lord" (Gk: *kyrie*), a much greater sign of respect than "Master" (Gk: *epistata*).

Just as Isaiah feels lost and unclean in front of the throne of God, so too does Peter feels afraid and unworthy to be in this man's presence. Think about your own lives when maybe you've felt

unworthy. It's a feeling of "I don't belong." Or "I don't have what it takes." It's the feeling of not knowing anyone. It's the feeling of not knowing how to do something. It's the feeling of not being able to keep it together. So yes, Jesus, it's better for you to just go away. I don't want you to see me like this.

Yet here in this place of shame, fear and uncertainty, the Beloved One of God speaks to Peter's heart: "Don't be afraid. From now on you will be catching people."

'Peter, you may think you don't have what it takes, but don't be afraid – it isn't about you. It's about what God is doing in this place. It's not about the fish you caught – it's about the blessing and abundance that comes from trusting in me. You can continue to labor in vain, or you can let go of all this stuff, and enter into a new way of being.'

Jesus is quite clever with his usage of the word "catch" here. Peter will no longer catch (Gk: *agra*) fish that are dead, but will catch (Gk: *zogron*) people who are alive. Rather than capturing fish and putting them to death, Peter will be capturing the hearts and minds of people, giving them new life. rescuing them from the danger of a meaningless or selfish life, and putting them in service to God's community.

Jesus helped to capture these fish so that he might capture the heart of Peter. His most ridiculous statement wasn't to fish in the middle of the day, but that Peter would now fish for men. And Peter could now believe because he had seen God at work in his own mundane livelihood.

So Jesus doesn't even ask or tell Peter and his partners to come and follow him, as he does in the other Gospels. No, Peter and company bring their boats to shore, leave everything and follow him. No more words necessary.

In the Greek, the word for "everything" means EVERYTHING – not just the fish, boats and nets, but their families, livelihoods and all they had ever known. Remember Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law. That means Peter had a wife and possibly children. The other partners probably had families, too. We hear later in Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians that Peter traveled with his believing wife. What a beautiful thing. But in this moment, at this time and place in the story, all Peter knows is that he must follow. That first step is always the hardest.

I imagine the scene: The close-up of the faces of these men, so transfixed and transformed by what has just happened, walking toward us before disappearing from view, following Simon, already a leader; sticking together now as they must through all the ups and downs on the journey ahead; and ever following the One who knows the Way. Then in the background, somewhat blurred but still distinct, there is a mass of people, dancing and rejoicing as they gather and share fish with one another. In the wake of God's action, the poor are not forgotten, and the community benefits from the blessing and abundance of God's grace.

What is the one thing needful in your life that you must do? That you must see through? That you must follow?

We come here each week to fall before the feet of Jesus, to gather around this table and celebrate the giving grace of Jesus the Christ... and then we are called from this place to follow in his footsteps. We are called to put away from the shore and go out into the deep. To let go of our past and embrace the future – one week, one day, one moment at a time.

The truth is: We are all called from the depths of woe and inadequacy in the world, to the light of joy and hope in Christ. Do you feel unworthy – that you don't have what it takes, the time, talent or resources? Do not be afraid. Whatever has been is not what will be. Your past is gone, feeding many people in its wake. Your future is alive, ready to captivate you and others.

Greater things are yet to come. There is no condition, no bargaining on God's part. God's call is as unpredictable as it is unmerited" (*Luke – John*, Anchor, 118). The Net of God's Call has been cast out into this world. When it caught Peter and Isaiah, they accepted – unconditionally – to share God's grace with the world.

How might we be caught up in God's call and share God's grace?

It may take a long time for many of us to commit to something unconditionally. Yet know this: God is unconditionally risking life and love for us. That God would risk so much to say that we have what it takes...! Well, now... that may just be enough to inspire a bit more trust, a bit more crazy, in all of us. We worship a God of crazy love.

Be careful. You just might get caught.

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