



THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

FEBRUARY 10, 2019

LUKE 5: 1-11

“WHO IS JESUS CATCHING?”

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.”

Simon answered, “Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”

When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.” So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

SERMON

I punched him in the face.

Without a before and after—the context—you don't know what to make of my statement.

A man jumped me with a knife—i punched him in the face—it turned out he had a criminal record.

Or

Tim wach reached out to shake my hand—i punched him in the face—i was arrested.

Context is critical. Context is crucial. Life events makes no sense without context....

Jesus is by the water, eventually on a boat on the water. And whenever the context of a sacred story is on or near the water, we are being alerted that we are dealing with a great truth. Water is the greatest sacred symbol for the boundless holy unknown.

Jesus is with fisherman who, at his command, pull up a huge catch of fish, even though they had been unable to catch anything all night long.

When we just go off on our own, thinking we know—even when it's our own area of expertise—we ultimately will fail. Because we are ignoring the great sacred unknown all around us.

These are fishermen and they can't catch squat. Then Jesus, says "throw your nets over there by the lily pads and the rocks" and, even though they are skeptical, they do it and about break their backs hauling in the fish.

What is the significance of fish in sacred stories?

Well, if the sea is the great divine unknown, then fish are holy tidbits of the unknown that we can eat.

That is how it works with taking in divine knowledge. Bit by bit, we can chew, swallow, and digest so that we are fed spiritually.

The story reaches its climax with Jesus' declaration: "don't be afraid. From now on you will be catching people."

There must be something scary about catching people otherwise Jesus would not say "do not be afraid," right?

If Jesus said, "let's go catch a beer and a fish sandwich at grant's bar." He wouldn't have to say, "Do not be afraid."

Now, how many times have i read this story and never asked, "Who does Jesus mean by 'catching people'?"

Does he mean every person? Or some particular kind of people?

And so, back to context.

I looked at this story and what came before this story and what came after this story and the unknown—what i didn't know until this week—was revealed.

I ate a fish, right?

And it changed the way i see.

This is what happens when we chew on, swallow, and digest a fish from the sacred sea. We are transformed just a bit.

Here's what comes before our story: "as the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands upon them and cured them. Demons also came out of many, shouting, "you are the son of god!"

And here's what comes after: "once, when he was in one of the cities, there was a man covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground and begged him, "lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." Then Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him and said, "I do choose. Be made clean."

And then this: "some men came, carrying a paralyzed man in a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus."

Finally, in response to challenges from the old guard, Jesus spells it out for them and us, "those who are well have no need of a physician. I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners to transformation."

Psychology has given us a lens into the spiritual symbolism of the bible. And thank god. Because who among us has demons, leprosy and paralysis?

Actually, all of us at some point in our life.

We just have to decipher the old spiritual language....

Around January 25th i dropped into the valley of the shadow of death. My sleep was restless; i awoke, hardly able to get out of bed. I dragged through the days feeling as though i was carrying a fifty pound weight on my shoulders. Foggy, sad, down. I felt horrible.

And then i talked to Deb about it and recalled that the anniversary of my mother's murder was coming up on February 4th. The 45th anniversary and still, i can be tormented and brought to my knees. What is a demon? A demon is a persistently tormenting person or force. It's still got me a little bit.

It is folly to think we "get over" anything. Where do we get over to? To a place in our life where what happens in our life disappears? What happens to us is all grist for the mill. Not getting over it, but what does it become and what does it produce in us? How does it transform us? Not everything can be metabolized and processed so that it sits quietly within our souls. There are experiences that haunt us, torment us, plague us. These are our demons. They grip us for a period of time. They grab hold of us and we are thrown into a different mindset. Our sense of our self shifts for a time as tendrils of the past reach out and wrap their icy fingers around us. Pulling us down. Knocking us around. Leaving us wondering, "What the heck is going on?"

My grief and torment became a fish i could digest when i became aware of the demon. I could bring it up out of the unknown and, once again, for the countless time, take in the demonic nature of this experience. And once again, it slowly loses its grip on me....

Leprosy represents all the ways in which life causes us to itch, scratch, and break out. The ways in which our skin erupts. The irritations. The scabs we pick. The rashes and eruptions. A physical itch means something is biting us or bugging us on an emotional level. Some difficulty needs to come out into the open. When we ignore it on the emotional level it eventually breaks out on the skin.

I've had clients who, when we start to get close to the real issue, unconsciously begin scratching and itching. Underneath the "skin problem" lies an emotional itch, some burning issue, some inner fire that is being ignored or avoided. Scratching is similar to digging and scraping. We dig and scrape the earth to find something buried and hidden so we can bring it into the light. It is the same with our hidden concerns.

We all know the phrase "the patience of job." In his suffering, he does not speak out in anger or hurt or frustration. He is patient, so we think. But what happens? His skins breaks out in angry boils! Under the surface, he is not so patient! He is boiling inside!

So, we must dig around our souls to find out what is needling us, biting us, bugging us. Something in our souls wants out. A desire, a wish, a longing, a yearning.

And so, we throw our line under the surface of the water to catch the fish and digest it....

And who among us has not experienced paralysis. That is, being stuck, unable to move forward, frozen when trying to make a difficult decision. Fearful of making a move?

Again, countless clients have asked me, "What should i do?" As if i had the answer. As if i could relieve them of the responsibility for their own life. We gotta do our own fishing! We can help one another bait the hook and show where to fish, but we gotta pull up our own fish!

At age forty, i was paralyzed. Recently separated from my first wife, with two children and a mortgage. A well-paying job as a pastor at one of the largest Lutheran congregations in the country. But, no longer was i finding parish ministry meaningful. And i had long felt a burning desire—an itch—to be a therapist. But that would mean leaving my call, going back to school, looking for some source of income while in training. Practically, it made no sense.

What to do? Stuck. Frozen. Paralyzed.

And then i had a dream.

Crawling through a long tunnel by the water i came up in a clearing surrounded by trees, evoking the young adolescent years i spent at camp Mowana, our Lutheran camp in Ohio. In the clearing, a man and woman were talking about their challenges with adult education in their congregations. Adult education was one of my areas of responsibility in my congregation, so i pulled one of my cards from my shirt pocket.

It looked exactly like my card from the church, except under my name was not the title at my church, “pastor for growth and nurture,” but the title “soul doctor.”

Wisdom from beyond my frozen ego showed me the way. The dream was the fish I caught, chewed, swallowed, and digested.

Who are the people Jesus catches and teaches his disciples to catch?

“Those who are sick. I have come to call not the righteous, but the broken to transformation.”

The righteous folks act like their garbage don’t stink. The righteous are just here to help everyone else because they got it all together. Well, looks like Jesus is throwing you back in the water.

Look at the fishing line running through these stories—the context for Jesus catching people.

First, the people show their brokenness. I share my messed-up life so that you might catch the fact that we don’t need to be ashamed of what has brought us to our knees.

The demons shout out. The leper publicly bows down and begs. The paralyzed man is lowered by friends through a roof. It’s all out in the open.

This is the blessing of twelve steps groups. Members step out of the shame and say, “hi, I’m Bill and I’m an alcoholic.” Hi, I’m Sarah and I’m an addict.”

First, no shame and second, name it. This is what is tormenting me. This is the itch that is driving me crazy. This is where I am stuck. If you can name it, you can begin to build mastery over it.

And third, submitting and bringing it to someone greater than you. Allowing yourself to be caught by the sacred hook, the holy line, the divine fisher of men and women.

Because Christ once walked the earth, suffered here, died here, was raised from the dead here and entered the great unknown here, there are countless avenues for healing all around us and within us.

But here’s what we might overlook because of the nature of sacred stories.

Fourth, it is hard work. When scripture tells stories, time is condensed. For example, I can tell you that I was in therapy off-and-on for eighteen years. And that it saved my life.

There. I just told the story in a few seconds. But you’re not going to sit here while I go over the highlights of each session for eighteen years.

The process of Jesus catching people and transforming them happens in an instance in the telling but, in reality, it takes time and hard work for the healing process to effect transformation.

We are healed by degrees. We are healed incrementally.

The second goal for CLC that came out of the leaders' retreat is in your bulletin insert: **“a genuine heart for the lost and the desire to embrace the mess.”** Inward-focused churches are dying churches. Growing churches aren't just conscious of the lost. They pursue them and are ready to take on the mess of life they may bring.

Yes, when it comes to fishing for what is keeping us down and out, keeping us itching and scratching, keeping us stuck and paralyzed, it is messy business. It's not pretty and it takes time. People in order that they might be transformed. Being involved in the transformation process for the sake of other people is also messy business.

But why did Jesus come among us? “I have not come to call the high and mighty, but the messed up for transformation.”

SERMON SONG

Shower the People by James Taylor