

10 February 2019

Epiphany V

St Luke 5: 1 - 11

When we look at our gospel lesson for this morning, one way of seeing it is that Jesus was being a nuisance that day. He was underfoot, and frankly, after a long and futile night of fishing, His presence was just plain inconvenient. If ever you have someone telling you what you should do when you are dead tired, you have a reasonable idea of how Peter and his friends must have felt.

Peter and the disciples simply wanted to clean and untangle their nets, pull the boats on shore, and get some rest. Instead, Jesus makes use of one of the boats, sits down, and starts teaching. There was no telling how long that might continue. We can almost imagine these very tired commercial fishermen, looking at him with disdain, wishing he would quickly wind things up.

And then, after He is done teaching, He has the audacity to tell the men to lower their nets on the other side of the boats into the deeper water Really? A man who grew up working in a carpenter's shop, an itinerant preacher and healer? He's telling these experienced men what to do? But, perhaps just to silence him, they sigh deeply and do as they are told.

We know the results. Peter and the others lowered their nets and pulled in the biggest catch of their lives. It was so huge, and the way it all happened was so frightening, that Peter knelt down in front of Jesus.

All three of our passages follow the same thread of God calling individuals to what today we would say is "spiritual vocation." Isaiah is the odd man out among the prophets and the men and women who answer God's call. Most of them, from Moses to Jeremiah, to nearly all of the other major and minor prophets, all start coming up with excuses. I'm too young. I don't know how to speak in front of a crowd, and so on. Isaiah, volunteers. He's got his hand up - send me, send me, I'll do it. Or again, Saul of Tarsus, whose name would be changed to St Paul, was an outright enemy and oppressor of the followers of Jesus. For none of these three, nor for most of the others in the Old and New Testament, do these invitations from God come at convenient times.

I suspect that could be said for many of us.

That should be a perpetual reminder for all of us - rarely do good and wonderful opportunities according to our time schedule and calendar, or at what we are convinced is the right time.

Rather, they are presented right in front of us, and in an instant we get to decide and say 'yes' or 'no' to them. Nor do they always appear to be coming under the big umbrella of church-related opportunities.

They are spontaneous opportunities. A last minute invitation, a chance to do something a little out of the ordinary even when we don't feel ready for it, or when part of our mind is saying, "I have other things I really need to finish first." And many times, it can be something that is seemingly quite small and doesn't look very important.

We need to always remember that these God-given opportunities rarely look very spiritual, at least at the outset. Certainly that is the case in our Gospel lesson for this morning - fishing. But God often uses these secular moments to lead into a greater and more dynamic spiritual lesson.

Our collect has a phrase which is truly important to us as we look at these lessons, and then seek ways to apply them in our life - 'give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your son Jesus Christ.'

The important phrase is the liberty of that abundant life. We are given the opportunity, the liberty, to explore things rather than merely repeat past actions. We have the opportunity to move in new directions in our life, rather than following a plan or programme that someone or even ourselves, scripted out for us. These opportunities come in all forms, and as I said, they aren't often under the umbrella of the church.

Over a century ago there was a young professor of economics and mathematics at a Canadian university. He had earned his doctorate from the University of Chicago before returning home. He settled into his career, teaching and writing, and it was a rewarding and successful professional life. People thought he was dull, an egghead, and worse. So economics was a good choice for him, because he didn't have people skills, no social life, and didn't fit in. One day he over-heard a conversation that was rude and demeaning about an individual, and he soon realized the people were talking about him. Their words and derisive laughter was so painful he withdrew, not from teaching, but from connecting with people. The words from that conversation hurt beyond measure.

As a very good friend explained there was so much pain in the world it was necessary to withdraw. Still, like most people, he needed to get his hair cut from time to time, and he was in a small town and stopped by a barber shop. He was as quiet as usual, never joining in the conversation, but he listened to the others talk, gently, about some of the other people in the area.

Something touched him. As Father Jim would often say, it wasn't coincidence that he was in that particular barbershop at that particular time with those particular customers. It was a God-moment. And so he began creating his own world - the little lakeside town of Mariposa, and populated it with his own people. They were gentle stories of small town life, and to augment his meagre income he sent them to a publisher. They sold well, and over the years he wrote many stories and published a long series of collections that are still in print today.

They are in print because they are wonderful stories of ordinary people in an ordinary town doing ordinary things, and people could see themselves and others in them. People saw the humour, not just in the stories but in their own life, and they felt better about things.

To me, that was Steven Leacock's fishing moment - out of the bleakness of his life to make people feel a bit better about themselves and see humour in the world.

Stories of people who have pulled up their nets and found their niche in life are blessed and are a blessing to others.

A credit card company is famous for asking, "What is in your wallet?" but the real life-question is 'what is in your net, and are you going to risk pulling it up?' When you do, if you do, then you take the risk of finding yourself commissioned with your vocation.