

The Fifth Sunday of Epiphany—
St. Luke 5:1-11
February 10th, 2019
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

A Humbling Holiness
“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

Peter and company we are told, spent the previous night fishing with no luck: Peter told Jesus... “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”

Up to this moment, Peter had associated with and followed Jesus as a friend, an inspiring leader, but very much one of the troops like us. Jesus does something in the story today to change that. After getting into a boat and putting a little way off the shore to address a crowd of people gathered to hear him, when he finishes, Jesus instructs Peter to put out into the sea a little further and cast his nets. Peter is not only doubtful, but he is reluctant to follow the command because of his recent experience the past night fishing in the same place without any luck whatsoever. However, wanting to be a loyal friend to Jesus, he does as he is commanded. What happens next will change everything. As far as we know from the text, the miracle which ensues is not even the result of the prayers of the fisherman for success, but rather God anticipating what they have been working and looking for. And we know the rest.

After pulling up the nets, the experienced fishermen are bewildered. How could this have happened? Where did all of these fish come from? Did we just see what I think we see? Peter is completely shocked and humbled to meet and be in the presence of the holiness of God in the person of Jesus. He exclaims out loud his reaction: “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

This Jesus, however, that he encounters is very different from other folks. The air He breathes is much rarer, and He is unlike anyone that anyone Peter or any of us has encountered ever before or since. Peter gets it when he hauls in his nets. This person can control the forces of nature. There is no magic trick here.

This reminds me of the Eucharistic devotional which is taken from another Biblical text about the healing of a girl back in the home of the centurion: “Lord, I am not worthy you should come under my roof...” When we encounter the holy we are humbled and we realize that we are but a grain of sand on a large, long beach. We

come to this realization in this encounter after feeling as though we are the center of the universe and just about everything is either about us or revolves around us.

Often we do not realize the presence of the holy until after it has departed our life. My friend Richard was like that. I knew Richard for years. In the 1980's we often bumped into each other at social justice events, whether gatherings or demonstrations. While I played it safe and was never arrested at any demonstration, Richard, wearing his clericals was arrested at many, always offering non-violence and peaceful resistance and witnessing for the Lord he loved, whether it was fighting Apartheid, civil rights, nuclear weapons, or poverty, Richard witnessed to God's concern about it.

By the 1990's Richard showed up in my Hartford church regularly. We became closer friends. I learned his story of growing up in the shadow of our cathedral downtown where his father was the janitor, or as we in church circles say, (using more fancy terminology) "sexton." He grew up as a Roman Catholic. He wanted nothing more than to become a priest, and did so, and became a much loved and a good one. Then he added gay advocacy to his civil rights resume, and the Roman church expelled him. In his personal life, as far as I knew him, he was innocent of any sexual shortcomings and took his celibacy very seriously. He was devastated. After this rejection by the church of his youth and his adult vocation, he went through some pretty dark hours.

Rick, as most people knew him was always doing humble ministry and trying to love the unlovable whom no one else would love. In his personal life, he lived sparsely. For several years he slept on the couch of a friend. He gave away most all his possessions and passed along any gifts people gave him to those he would find in what he perceived was greater need than himself, and he would do so in a quiet way, so as not to offend the giver and those who received his largess never knew that it came from him. He did not call attention to himself or seek the praise of others. He wore clothes until they were threadbare and shoes until they were ready to fall apart. He drove an old car which he kept running and would loan it regularly to others who needed a ride.

Richard is now gone. Cancer took him from us. More than a thousand people showed up for his funeral at Holy Trinity Church in Middletown. I have pieced together his story in hindsight. I had no real grasp of the holiness of this man until he was gone, as we often appreciate situations and people in hindsight-all of us. But my reaction when I put his story together was similar to that of Peter in this morning's Gospel: I felt unworthy to trod where Richard had gone. I did not even feel worthy to stand in his shoes. All he ever wanted to do was be a priest, love

Jesus, and love others. In hindsight I see how successful he was in his desire to serve God. His success [we can say that in hindsight] in living the Christian life, made him a very holy person. His imitation of Jesus was almost total and complete. I wish you could have known him.

I contrast this with a memory of my visiting a woman in the hospital who was very ill, of course, wearing my clerical garb and doing my regular duty as a parish priest. She said to me after I had given her communion and anointed her with Holy Oil, near the end of the visit, "I am such a terrible and lowly person, and you are so good, so perfect. What chance do I have?" Instead of bringing hope and lifting up her spirits, I left her with the "holier than thou" impression that I may have made many feel. When those words fell off her lips, I did not take them as a compliment, but rather as a caution. Of course, I told her before I packed up my things and left, that only God is perfect, and that I was also a sinner and not to worry.

We have a God who bridges the chasm between infinite and finite, between perfect and imperfect, between sin-free and sinful. We are no longer left apart from God. We are not left lost without hope. God reaches across the seemingly vast space between us, and touches our lives, pulls us back into God's heart along with this Holy Jesus.

An abundance of fish. An abundance of holiness. Nothing can ever be the same! What happened when the nets were pulled into the boat humbled all who witnessed it, for they now know they are not in the presence of an ordinary man any longer. So Peter proclaims his unworthiness to Jesus. Yet Jesus loves him and accepts him just as he is. So he does with us, if you sense His net being cast for you!

'Lord I am not worthy you should come under my roof, but you have invited me under yours. You have spoken the words that my broken heart and spirit have been healed and my life renewed! AMEN