

5 Epiphany – Year C – February 7, 2010
Isaiah 6:1-13; Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11
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Did you ever play the game of sardines? If you've ever travelled on any of the major city's metro, subway, or underground rail systems during rush hour, you know sardines. Especially, when it comes to that last person who rushes towards the door and slips in sideways. One thing we all know about that kind of mass transportation is that you can forget the norms of personal space. When physical contact is unavoidable, we mostly retain our dignity by avoiding eye contact. Instead, making little sidelong glances, or resolutely staring at the route map. Even in our prayers or worship, sometimes we see or hear something that gets too close to a place we don't want to go today, out of fear or anger, out of pride or shame, or just plain resistance.

“On a personal level, which is where it all starts, Peter is a grand and honest statement about how we all come to God. The pattern is a great surprise, and for many a great shock and even a disappointment. We clearly come to God not by doing it right but ironically by doing it wrong,” so says Richard Rohr. The narrative of today's Gospel lesson from Luke is hard to define exactly. It is a call story. It's also a miracle story, and a resurrection narrative. Perhaps above all it is a bit like the game of sardines we play with God. Often squeezing ourselves into impossibly small spaces, taking a narrow view, and trying to hide from God. Or maybe that small space, with limited options for movement or growth, is where we find ourselves when we try to rely on our own strength, instead of trusting God in Christ. Even there, we may catch little glimpses of the kingdom of God's grace from the corner of our eye, as we surreptitiously observe others, or recognize a miracle in our own lives. Eventually, we risk the gift of reconciliation, and begin to desire more and more the intimacy of God's close presence.

In many ways, you and I are all Simon, and we are all Peter. All of us in the process of transformation between two identities: the old self, caught in a net of sin, just trying to keep our heads above water, and get through the challenges of life. All this as we respond to God's call and begin to discover that we are not who we thought we were. As we grow into a new person, feeling our way around a new home called 'freedom in Christ' we gradually change old habits. We leave some things behind, and transform other gifts into new purpose. We begin to lose ourselves in Christ, letting go of control, and exploring strange new waters. Wherever you and I currently are in this voyage of transformation, just hearing some of the anchor points sounds overwhelming doesn't it? Which is why, like Simon, James and John, you and I also need to hear Jesus say, “Do not be afraid.”

In the assurance that we are covered and protected by God's love, let's take a closer look at Simon Peter's story. Simon has graciously allowed Jesus to get into his boat and push out a little way into shallow water. We can take the story at face value, yet given what is about to happen to Simon Peter, it is also so much more. Simon has been wading in the shallows around Jesus for a while, taking a few sideways glances, gradually opening his heart, creating a gap big enough for Jesus to slide in like a last minute commuter. Yet Simon has also been trying hard to protect his livelihood with his business partners James and John. For first century Galileans fishing means food and therefore life. This small band of fisherman are washing their nets after a long night of fruitless labor. After Jesus finishes His teaching, he calls Simon over and says, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Notice that it is still Simon who answers Jesus, saying that they have already worked all night and caught nothing. What do you think? Jesus, one time carpenter, and now itinerant prophet, preacher and healer, tells Simon the fisherman to go fish. All Simon's instincts and experience would be laughing and screaming at the absurd request. Simon's glimpse of the power of God's kingdom in Jesus ministry is such that he sets aside pride in his own knowledge and ability, and takes the radical first step of obedience to Jesus' call.

For those of us who don't know much about first century fishing techniques, here's a little information that might help. It is likely that Simon and his partners were using trammel nets, which are triple-layered nets lowered into the water like a big sheet. They are particularly effective for night fishing. It takes two to four people to handle a trammel net, and they have to be washed carefully after each use. That explains why they had been out all night, and why they were washing the nets. It also explains why the catch of fish is miraculous – not just because Jesus has no experience or expertise at fishing, but because during the day, trammel nets are easy for the fish to see and avoid. The miraculous abundance of the daytime catch is by no means lost on Simon. However, in the comfort of our modern-day faith, you and I may find it a bit too easy to dismiss this miracle as Jesus being Jesus. There is some truth in that, but if we stop there we're also missing something crucial to our own spiritual growth. In Simon's obedience to Jesus' call, he has already begun his move towards his new identity as Peter. Luke beautifully captures for us another step in Simon's development. The Scripture says, "But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees."

Simon Peter -- no longer just Simon – has seen and experienced the miracle of God's abundant grace. What he could not do under his own steam, becomes a life-giving sign revealed in his faith, trust and obedience to God's call. Yet Simon Peter also recognizes the gift of grace in stark relief against his own sinfulness. The miracle of God's abundant, steadfast and unconditional *agape* love would not be grace if we deserved it. Grace, by definition is unearned and undeserved. By the end of the passage, Jesus speaks again with Simon, the fisherman, who is about to become a catcher of people. God does not call the equipped, but equips the called. Like the ebb and flow of the tides, we take a few steps forward and then step back to regroup and adjust to the changes. We are all like Peter. His life as a disciple of our Lord Jesus will reflect your life of faith and mine. One day proclaiming Jesus the Messiah, the next day rebuking Jesus for fulfilling God's call on *His* life. Some days even denying that I know Jesus by what I say or don't say, what I do or fail to do. God's steadfast love never changes: however much I mess up, however much we deny God or make mistakes, God still loves you, me and all His children. What we must guard against is that sly way that our disbelief in God's unconditional love encourages us to make excuses to avoid answering the call. Is God calling us today to push out into the deep waters? Is God calling us to wade into the shallow waters, to build up the Body of Christ?

This miracle is more than just Jesus being Jesus. Jesus comes to offer us the way to salvation and eternal life through God's gift of grace and faith in Him. Jesus also comes to empower us, and that is when we take the step from accepting the gift of salvation, into the boat of discipleship. As Jesus says in John's Gospel, "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these" (John 14:12). The astonishing truth is that in following Christ, we all become catchers of people. As usual, the Greek is more nuanced than the English is. The catch is to be as abundant as the haul of fish. Yet this form of catching is more like catch and release fishing. Sharing the Good News is a gift of life, releasing all who come to faith in Christ from the burden of sin and death. By God's grace, we are all empowered in different ways to use our different nets in God's service. Pastor Frederick Niedner once said, "Here is a truth to cherish always: We don't mend, tend or haul the net; rather, by God's grace we *become* the net." Part of living our resurrection life now is stepping into the boat of discipleship and putting out into deep waters for a catch. It means we spend less time squeezing into tight spaces, like round pegs in a square hole; and more time experiencing the spacious freedom and fullness of life in Christ. Do not be afraid, follow where Christ leads.

Amen.