

February 7, 2010

Scripture: Luke 5: 1-11

Sermon: "At the Shore of the Lake"

We follow up last week's story where Jesus preached at his home church with Luke's version of the story about the calling. We have heard this story or at least a version of this story about a hundred times because this story or some form of this story can be found in all the Gospels. All these stories include the same moment, that moment when the disciples met Jesus, where they dropped their nets and followed Jesus. We may be able to relate to this moment because we most likely can say that we have encountered God in our lives at one point or another and that that moment changed our lives; otherwise we wouldn't be sitting here this morning. This sermon should have been easy to write. But...

One phrase kept, I guess you could say, rubbing me the wrong way. "You will be catching people". There is just something about that phrase that makes me uncomfortable. There is just something about that phrase that brings to mind images of people flailing on a line. When I read this phrase, my mind didn't automatically go towards images about fishing. It went to images of hunting. When I read this phrase, I had images of African safaris popping into my head. Images of traps. Images of bait. Images of heads mounted on the wall like trophies. Images of great hunters preying on the weak.

Now don't get me wrong...I'm from a good Southern family who has done their share of hunting and fishing and have deer heads and trophy fish on the walls. But I have to tell you there is something about the phrase "catching people" that brings to my mind that once these trophies are mounted, all we see are their glassy eyes, their vacant stares and it made me wonder: Is that what we as people of faith do when we invite others to experience God and God's Kingdom? Do we turn people into trophies mounted on a wall with vacant looks and glassy eyes? Is that what we offer as the Kingdom of God?

I started thinking: Do we invite people in only to consume them later? And is that how we as the church are perceived? Is that the image that we as the Church portray today, preying on the weak, tricking them to get into the doors, inviting them only to have that invitation of welcome turn into an invitation to be consumed? and then once we get people inside, what do we offer our brothers and sisters? glassy eyes and blank stares? Empty phrases and empty promises? False feelings and false connections?

I think if Jesus knew how the Church, how we as people of faith had used and abused this phrase "catching people" than he would have used a different phrase to talk about discipleship. I am not sure that Jesus would appreciate how we as the Church have interpreted this phrase. I am not sure Jesus would appreciate we as the Church have equated God's love and God's grace to setting traps, using bait, or reeling them in. Have you ever reeled in a fish? It is not very grace-filled. The fish gasps for breath. Their eyes seem to be filled with fear. They flail around, struggling to be set free. Is that how we say Welcome to the church?

When we interpret this phrase, "catch people" as a way to snare people, then we have turned the Body of Christ into an all consuming, trapping, life-taking organization that reels people in only

to have them gasp for breath. When we use the phrase “catch people” as a way to reel people in, then we have turned the Body of Christ into traps and bait, glassy eyes and blank stares. No, I don’t think Jesus would like what we have done as people of faith very much at all especially knowing what he did preach about concerning the unconditional nature of God’s love, especially knowing what he did preach about concerning the inviting, welcoming presence of the Kingdom of God, especially knowing what he did preach about concerning the God-given, freely-given gift that is God’s grace.

No I don’t think Jesus would like very much how we are living out the phrase “catching people”. And to be honest, I don’t think Luke liked how his community may have been living out the phrase “catching people either”. And that’s why in his version of this story, he really doesn’t focus on the call of the disciples. When he shares his version of this story, Luke’s main focus is on Jesus teaching . It is through the Word of God that lives are changed, altered, transformed. A word of peace. A word of hope. A word of freedom from snares, traps, baits, reels. A word of grace.

Luke starts his story just like all the other Gospels but then he adds a twist. You see, in the other Gospels, Jesus is new at his ministry. He really has just begun preaching or teaching but in this story according to the Gospel of Luke, he has been at it for a while. He has traveled around teaching and preaching about the Kingdom of God and that how Luke starts his story. Jesus is at the Lake Shore and he is being surrounded by people who want to hear the Good News. They are pressing in on him, straining just to hear him speak. So he looks around and there are a couple of boats so he climbs in and asks the fisherman who happens to be Simon to push away from the shore.

And Jesus begins to preach...Jesus begins to teach. Jesus begins to share about the gift of God’s grace. Jesus begins to share about how God loves all. Jesus begins to say that God’s Kingdom is for all of God’s children, that all are God’s beloved children, that all are invited to eat at God’s table, filled with the goodness of God.

It is only after he finishes preaching and teaching does Jesus take notice of Simon. It is only after the crowd experiences and hears God’s word does Jesus take notice of Simon and the other fisherman. It is only after the Word of God is shared does Jesus call his first disciples. Because Jesus knows that at the core of faith, at the core of discipleship, at the core of our foundation as people of faith, there is the word of God, a word that shapes the sweep of the human story.” Jesus knows that “[the word of God] alters the lives of those who hear and heed.” Jesus knows that once people hear the Word of God, the invitation of God, the freeing message of God’s love and grace then we are changed and ready for the call to be disciples, not as a way to capture or catch people, but as a way to show there is another way, to show that the Good News frees us to be the people that God created us to be, to show that there is something life-giving, life-transforming and life-sustaining about God’s grace and God’s love that we experience through God’s word to us as people of faith, as God’s very own, as God’s Beloved.

Luke wants his community and us to understand today that “the calling [to be disciples, the calling to “catch people] is not a [way] to hook people and drag them in. It is rather to cast the net of God’s love all around-open to all the world-and then wait with patience for the Spirit’s

work and to see if anyone is caught by God's vision and God's grace." The key is God's grace. The key is God's hope. The key is God, not you and me.

When Luke shares in the story that Jesus tells Simon to go out again, to go fishing again, he wants his community and us as readers to understand that we are changed by following God's word, that we experience overwhelming blessings of God's grace and God's love by following God's word, that for us "as followers of the Living Word, life is never and can never be the same. It is altered forever."

Luke proclaims in this story: Here is the Good News! Jesus came and changed lives through his teaching and preaching. He shared God's word with us as children of God and that Living Word freed us, freed us from glassy eyes and blank stares, freed us from being roped in, freed us from being ensnared by the trappings of this world.

Luke says here is the Good News: When God's Word is shared and heard, it is not an invitation to be consumed. Rather it is an invitation to new life experienced through God's grace and God's love. God's Word frees us and inspires us to go out into the world to share this amazing life-giving experience. God's word renews us, comforts us, and gives us hope. And that is what God's Kingdom is all about. "The Kingdom requires not dead fish but human beings fully alive, not creatures writhing in the last gasps before death but people living the life of the good news in all its fullness."

That is the Good News! The Word of God catches us from the snares of this world, pulls us from the traps of death, saves us from the ambushes of despair and depression and breathes new life into us as God's very own.

God has a purpose and a plan for all of God's people to live in community with one another. God has a plan for all of us to actively work in achieving the Kingdom of God on earth. God has a plan and a purpose for each and every one of us to share God's Word, to issue the invitation for new life and hope to all of God's children. To invite people to think about our world in a new way, to expand their understanding of power and might, to transform their thinking beyond our human standards to what God is calling us to do and to be.

That is what Jesus meant when he invites the disciples to "catch people". That is what Jesus meant when he begins teaching along the lake shore to the crowd and to the fisherman in the boat that morning. That is what Jesus meant when he said, "Let down your nets for a catch." God's Word is an invitation to new life. God's Word transforms us. God's Word saves us. God's Word frees us as God's children to be the people that God created us to be.

Luke shares this story with us as a true Epiphany text, a text that invites us to experience Jesus in a new light, a text that invites us to experience Jesus in a new way, a text that invites us to reclaim the true mission and vision of the Kingdom of God. And that is to invite all to experience the life-giving, life-changing, life-transforming Word of God as a way to be saved from the traps and snares that this world has to offer.

Lives are changed when we open our mind and our hearts to the Word of God and experience the possibilities of God in our lives through the words and teachings of Jesus Christ. We are freed when we embrace the Word of God that is full of hope, full of grace, full of Love.

When we realize this, then we as the church will no longer only offer glassy eyes and blank stares to those who enter our doors because we know, understand, and live out in our own lives, in our own communities, in our own world that there is life, renewal, comfort and hope in the Word of God. When we realize this, we will see the invitation to “catch people” not as a way to snare them, to consume them, trap them but as a way to free them through God’s grace and God’s love.

And that is the Good News that we proclaim as followers of Jesus Christ. God’s Word brings new life. God’s Word brings freedom. God’s Word brings hope. And that is the invitation that we are called to live out when we hear the phrase “You will be catching people”.

May we open our hearts and minds to the freeing possibilities of God’s Word in our lives, in our communities and in our world. Amen.