

Sunday February 9, 2025
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Meditation: “Calling All Cads”

The markets had been all right lately; not outstanding, but not dismal either; just enough for him to keep his head above water. Then it happened; a long hard night of work and nothing to show for it. Not one fish in the nets. What was worse was the bumper crowd of potential customers on the shore, but he was so tired that it hardly mattered. He went back to cleaning the weeds out of the nets and tried not to think about it all. He was exhausted and just wanted to get home for some rest. And then, the prophet, the one the crowds had come to hear, wanted to use his boat. He was tired, and he probably wouldn't even get any rent for it, but what choice did he have? The man was already in his boat, and he couldn't just throw him out, not in front of that crowd. He'd have been attacked. Reluctantly he rowed out a little way and then stowed the oars and slumped in his seat. At least he might catch a little rest while the prophet droned on.

When the prophet finished his teaching, he instructed him to put out into deep water and let down his nets. Was he mad? Did he want to make a laughingstock of the fisherman? Let's give a little demonstration of the fisherman who can't catch fish! Besides, every bonehead knows that you catch fish in the shallows, not in the deep water. The nets are only three feet wide. “Master,” he said, “we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.”

He caught something then, though. The prophet shot him a look that would have frightened a stubborn camel into submission. “Yet, if you say so, I will let down the nets.” He put out the nets, and then started pulling them back in. There were fish. Lots of fish. Lots and lots of fish. There were so many fish that the nets were starting to tear. There were so many fish that the boat was sitting dangerously low in the water, and the nets were only partly in. There was no way to row back to shore trailing so much net in the water, and there was no way he could pull in the rest of the nets, the boat would sink, and he would likely drown because he was too far from shore to make it back. He was starting to

panic. He called his partner to bring out the other boat. The other fisherman had seen what was happening and was already on the way to help. They pulled the other end of the nets into the second boat until it too was in danger of sinking. Never had they had such a catch before. The prophet sat there smugly with that look that says, 'I told you so. Now do you believe me?'

Who was he? Really? O Lord! Oh! Lord! He fell before him, as much as one can fall in a boat teeming with fish. "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man."

As I thought about the gospel lesson several things crossed my mind. First off was that Peter (or Cephas in Chaldean ... meaning rock) was a sinful man. In the Old Testament reading for today, Isaiah too identified himself as a sinful man, or "a man of unclean lips" as he put it. In fact, the most famous people in the bible are sinners. Moses murdered the Egyptian overseer and then fled Egypt. David had an affair with a married woman and then had her husband killed in such a manner as to look like an accident. Paul tracked down the early Christians and made sure that they were stoned to death for uttering heresies. What is God doing calling sinners? Okay, so everyone here who is not a sinner please put up your hand. Now look around. If God did not call sinners, who would God call? There is no-one else! I'm not without sin. You're not without sin. None of us is. Certainly not Irene.

When I worked as a street outreach worker in Toronto I met Irene. Irene was a recovering crack addict and a former sex trade worker. She heard the call to work as a street outreach worker. When I met Irene, she was indeed working as a health outreach worker with street people, addicts and sex trade workers. She handed out condoms and safe crack kits. She connected people to health services that don't require Health Cards or make negative judgments. These are people who don't want an ambulance called when they are seriously ill. You see, if you call 911 for an ambulance the police automatically show up too, and Irene's client base was made up of people who didn't want the police involved in their lives. They are suspicious of social service workers who they see as naïve

do-gooders who inadvertently do more harm than good. Someone like Irene at least stands half a chance of reaching out to such people because of her own background. She understands their issues and concerns, and she knows some of the people from her time as an addict and sex trade worker. You see, we are all sinners and fall short of the glory of God, and we are all called to spread the gospel in our own way.

The second thing that struck me was this, what if those who are called don't listen, don't heed the call?

Peter was called to leave all that he knew, all that he valued, and, after the huge haul of fish, he was called to leave a life of comfort. But what if Peter had stayed? How long would the money from that catch have lasted? Could he have retired to a life of ease, or would he have been like the farmer who tore down his barn to build a bigger barn to hold his bumper crop, only to die that night? Without Peter would the church ever have formed? Remember, Peter was the rock upon which the fledgling church grew after the crucifixion. Without a church, would we have public education, social support networks like EI, and welfare, or universal health care, all of which grew out of our Christian values?

What would have happened if Moses had ignored the message at the burning bush? Would the Israelites have continued on as slaves, cruelly oppressed by the Egyptians? Would the Egyptians have felt threatened by the burgeoning Israelite population and committed genocide? Would God have found another intervenor? And what about Moses? Would he have stayed on at his father-in-law Jethro's place in Midian herding goats?

What if Irene had not heeded the call? Would she have continued as a dominatrix in the sex trade and as a crack addict? Would she have died from an overdose? And what of all the people she helped on the streets? Would they have died from overdoses, or frozen on the streets in an extreme cold alert, or????

So too with my own call. What if I had been unwilling to leave my career with IBM? How would my life have turned out? How would the lives of all those to whom I've ministered been different?

In order to follow God's calling, we have to leave behind much: our way of life; our assumptions; everything. You see, the call is a call to do something that is very unsettling. It is a call to be transformed. The call to transformation is something that is frightening for all of us, because we see it as a call away from all that we know, all that we value, all that gives us comfort, no matter how unhealthy it may be for us and for others. And, the call is to something that is unfamiliar and unknown, which is scary in and of itself. But oh, so often, the call leads us into uncomfortable and frightening places. Between seminary and ordination I worked as a street outreach worker in Toronto. One day, in the course of doing our job, I received a death threat from a client who was jailed. What would happen when he was released and came looking for me?

When Jesus called Peter to follow him, I'm sure all that Peter saw, at least initially, was a call away from all of those fish. Those fish, or the money they would bring in at the market, were something concrete, in which he could trust. They were an answer to all of his desires; all his hopes and dreams and prayers. And Jesus wanted him to leave them all behind.

Peter went on to be a fisher of people, and many people's lives were forever changed. I went on to become a minister. Irene went on to become an outreach worker. The lives of those she serves are transformed because she allows God's Holy Spirit to work through her.

Perhaps the most important thing to note is that when Peter turned, he saw that our Lord was right there with him. Yes, a call is a call away from something, but it is also a call to something, and even if we don't know where the call will take us, we can take comfort in the fact that God will be there with us.

What about us as individuals and as a congregation? Are we listening for God's call? Are we willing to let go of, well, not to put too fine a point on it, are we

willing to let go of our very lives in order to follow God's call? What happens if we don't, or won't? What happens to us? What happens to those we could have served? What happens to God? Will God allow suffering to go unanswered? Or will God shut us down and call someone willing to listen and respond?

God calls us, imperfect people, to walk away from all that gives us comfort and a sense of security, to do the seemingly impossible, *AND* God promises to be with us in the midst of it all. Are we listening? Are we prepared to respond?

Take time this week to listen for the voice of our Lord calling to you, and when you look, may you see our Lord in the face of those you extend a hand to, and may you see our Lord in the face of those who extend a hand to you. Amen.