

Sermon by Audrey Klein-Leach, Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A

1326

Let the words of my mouth and meditation of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Before delving into today's readings, let's take a look at the Gospel reading within the larger context of Matthew's Gospel. The passage just before our reading is Jesus' temptation by the devil in the desert. The chapter following this reading is the Sermon on the Mount. So today's reading acts as a bridge from Matthew showing how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Torah by highlighting Jesus' genealogy, birth, baptism, and temptation to what will follow - Jesus' active ministry of teaching and healing. This short passage also begins laying the very groundwork for the Church itself as Jesus calls his first disciples.

Jesus, just back after spending forty days and nights in the desert, learns that John the Baptist has been arrested. Given the news, Jesus decides to leave Nazareth, a small, relatively isolated inland town during his lifetime, and to walk about 20 miles to the fishing village of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. An interesting fact, the Sea of Galilee is actually a freshwater lake. Capernaum was a strategic location as it was an important highway used by people from all over the ancient world making it an excellent way to "get the word out" about Jesus' ministry to Jews and Gentiles alike.

I can only imagine what Jesus might have been thinking as he headed toward Capernaum. "This is getting real. Herod has arrested John. How much longer before he or someone else comes for me?" Maybe he reflected on his life up to this point. So much had happened already. "John baptized me and then the Spirit of God descended like a dove. And I immediately went into the desert where the devil tempted me. I think this call is real and it's going to be intense. It's time for me to get serious and fulfill God's larger mission. And for that, I am going to need some help. I am not always going to be here. I need reliable people who will carry on God's work even when I am no longer with them. Where on earth am I going to find the people with the needed skills and fortitude?"

And then there's Peter and Andrew, James and John. In Matthew, Mark and Luke (the Synoptic Gospels) these are the first four disciples to be called. They are just going about their ordinary lives, doing what they do each day – fish. They mend their nets, set the nets, catch the fish, clean the fish, sell the fish and then do it all over again.

And then it happens – Jesus comes upon Peter and Andrew and all their lives are forever changed. To Peter and Andrew, Jesus says, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people. Immediately they left their nets...” Not the following week or the following month, or after writing a pro/con list, but immediately. James and John, too, responded to Jesus' call immediately.

What would possess four relatively prosperous fisherman to do such a thing? I think most, if not all of us, have faced a similar moment. We meet someone and somehow we just know. It's not rational. It is just a feeling felt in every fiber of your being. It is the total and immediate response of your entire mind, heart and will to the other person, in this case, Jesus, who says, “follow me. I am going to show you a new way.”

The famous preacher, Frederick Buechner writes in *The Magnificent Defeat*, “ You do not come first to understand a person fully and then to love him, but love comes first and then it is out of the love that understanding is born....Faith is the word that describes the direction our feet start moving when we find we are loved. Faith is a stepping out into the unknown with nothing to guide us but a hand just beyond our grasp.”

But, I ask myself, why fisherman? Why not carpenters like himself? Or herders?

Maybe it's because fishermen or lobstermen – even to this day – tend to be wary of strangers, but are also part of a very tight knit community. They are by their nature practical, persistent and skilled. They have to be tenacious in the face of whatever Mother Nature throws at them. That is exactly the skill set Jesus needed to build the Church and spread the God's message of redemption. Honorable, ordinary people who would be called do the extraordinary – to be witnesses to God's transformation of life itself through Jesus' life, death and resurrection. What we see in the calling of his disciples is Jesus being very intentional about building the community that will become the Church.

Somehow Jesus cracked the fisherman's code – he understood them, he met them where they were. And being loved for being themselves compels the Peter, Andrew, James and John – and us – to respond saying, “Yes, Lord, I will follow.”

That said, they didn't totally give up fishing, that ordinary part of their life. What Jesus is saying to the disciples, and to us, is that following his call isn't so much calling us *out of* our ordinary lives – although it could be – but it is calling us to see that no matter how ordinary life may seem, it is actually quite *extraordinary*. Jesus is calling us to live and operate in world transformed by his death and resurrection.

Jesus implicitly understands that to create something that's self-sustaining – what ultimately would become the Church – he needs to a core group that is willing to work together toward a common goal with persistence and tenaciousness grounded in a love for one another and God. For the Gospel writer Matthew, Jesus is the Messiah foretold in the Torah. He is what the Jews have been waiting for, but he is also the Messiah for the *whole world*. Matthew's goal is to build the church on the foundation stone of the Peter and the disciples who will guard and interpret God's revelation through Jesus.

Just one last thing I couldn't stop thinking about when sitting with these texts is the fishing nets Peter, Andrew, James and John used.

The nets of New Testament time were made of linen. Flax was soaked then beaten to separate the fibers and then twisted to create cord that was then used to create the net. They had to be carefully cleaned, dried and mended each day or they would wear out and become useless. They would literally rot.

Nets – a web of fabric created by humans - are a good analogy for the spiritual web Jesus is creating here at the start of his ministry. The Church is the physical manifestation of that spiritual net. There is no denying the Church is a very human institution as is made clear in our reading from Corinthians. We humans waiver. We prevaricate – even when our whole being wants to respond to God's call. The psalmist understands this. He speaks eloquently about faith and vulnerability and reminds us that the key to conquering our fears is having courageous trust in the Lord.

Paul urges the Church in Corinth - and the Church down throughout the ages - to seek unity. Paul reminds those in Corinth that the very nature of history itself has been changed because of Jesus' death and resurrection. It means the ordinariness of who we are is changed and our actions in the world need to be a response to Jesus' amazing gift to each of us. Paul is reminding us to live out our call to love another, to live a life transformed even in the ordinariness of what each of us do every day. I think today's Canticle summarizes it far better than I can:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is Love. In this the love of God was revealed among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through Jesus Christ. In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son that sins might be forgiven. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we ought also to love one another. For if we love one another, God abides in us, and God's love will be perfected in us.

Amen.