

“Dropping Our Nets”

February 7, 2010

Scripture: Luke 5:1-11

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Luke’s version of how Jesus met and called his first disciples is quite a bit different from the other gospel accounts. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus simply walks by and calls them to follow. They drop everything and go with him. In John’s Gospel the disciples actually seek him out, after being instructed to by John the Baptist. Of course every gospel writer has a reason for telling the story they way he does, and Luke is no exception.

Jesus has already made a name for himself in the region of Galilee before he meets Simon and his partners. In fact Simon has had Jesus to his home where Jesus healed Simon’s mother-in-law. So it’s not as though Jesus is a stranger. That helps explain why Simon is so accommodating, after having been on the lake all night, to allow Jesus to use his boat.

We can imagine what it might have been like for Simon and his partners. All night long they had been out there, dropping the nets and bringing them up empty over and over. I understand the method was a sort of herding of the fish. The net would be put in place away from the shore and the boats would be used to drive the fish toward it. It sounds like a lot of hard work for very little return. Simon didn’t have one of those bumper stickers that say, “A bad day fishin’ beats a good day at work!” They must have been exhausted. And of course who wouldn’t want to face a crowd of their friends and neighbors after spending the whole night failing at their profession. Simon was a whole lot friendlier toward Jesus than I would have been.

We don’t know what Jesus said to the crowd that day, what Simon heard as he sat there in the boat. He must have been impressed, though. Why else would he have humored Jesus by dropping the nets one more time? A catch like that might have been worth six months’ labor. It wasn’t normal and Simon Peter knew it. Instead of making Jesus a partner like most of us would have done, he tells Jesus to leave. But it was no ordinary catch. Jesus didn’t have him drop the net as a way to pay him for the use of the boat. That huge haul was a parable.

Jesus is showing Peter what life in the kingdom is like, and what his life could become if he’s willing to follow. “From now on you will be catching people.” Being a disciple, following Jesus, means dropping our nets to catch people. Now in some ways that image can leave a bad taste in my mouth. But I don’t think the nets we’re called to drop are meant to ensnare or trap or confine. I think of them as being meant to enfold and embrace and draw near. I think that’s what Jesus does with the net he drops for Peter, James and John.

The nets we drop to catch people are the ways we welcome folks who come through the doors. When we greet newcomers and invite them to be a part of this community, we drop a net to enfold them here. When we send hygiene kits to Haiti or travel to New Orleans or work in a soup kitchen or volunteer at a homeless shelter, we drop our nets as a way of embracing the world with the compassion and love of Christ.

Dropping our nets is the dimension of discipleship called evangelism. Now evangelism isn’t something we Presbyterians are best known for. In fact a lot of times we’re the first ones to deny we do it. But that’s only because we define it too narrowly. Evangelism simply means spreading the good news. And I don’t think that’s done best by arguing people into submission or browbeating them into

confession. As St. Francis said, “Preach the gospel at all times – when necessary, use words.” Our actions in the world on behalf of those who are impoverished or forgotten or rejected or lonely is evangelism.

And just as Peter was invited to join Jesus in gathering folks into the kingdom, so are we invited to gather folks in to experience God’s kingdom here. About 10 years ago a scholar named George Hunter wrote a book titled *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*. Now, Celtic forms of Christianity have become very popular in recent years, but Hunter offers something more than just a description of prayers and practices. He explores the nature of community that arose among Celtic Christians through Patrick and Columba, who founded the abbey on the island of Iona.

Hunter calls what emerged all over Ireland “monastic communities.” They were communities dedicated to contemplative forms of worship and work. They welcomed outsiders and offered them an alternative to the world around them. And even though a wall was built around them, the wall wasn’t meant as a barrier as it was a boundary between the world and God’s kingdom. Within those walls, according to one scholar, “Violence was legally and absolutely excluded...Monastic settlements [were] anticipations of paradise in which the forces of division, violence and evil were excluded.”*

In this understanding of evangelism discipleship is a call to an alternative way of living. It’s an invitation to enter a new world of meaning that rejects the assumptions that have conditioned us – assumptions like: our only hope lies in financial security, or we must only interact socially with people who are like us, or violence can only be solved through violence, or advocating for the poor isn’t the church’s business.

Rejecting those assumptions means letting go of a failed past, which brings me to another dimension of discipleship implied by dropping our nets. Peter, James and John literally dropped their nets behind them, even though those nets were full. They let go of their past lives to embrace the new life being offered them by Jesus. They couldn’t do both. Following Jesus means taking hold of one thing and letting go of another. If we want to become the disciples Jesus calls us to be, then we have to drop our nets that are full of fears and resentments and suspicions.

What that might mean for us as a congregation is we need to let go of the old models of being church that have reached their limits. We may need to reach out in new ways and learn new ways of welcoming others into our midst. We may need to explore how we worship, how we educate, how we use our resources to discern if we are providing a place where the world can meet God’s kingdom. Dropping our old nets behind us, however full they may seem, is the only way we can move forward with Christ into the adventure of discipleship.

For Peter, James and John the decision for discipleship came quickly, but becoming disciples took a lifetime. And like them, we’re always on our way, always moving toward the kingdom. Our hope is the world will see God’s kingdom reflected in us, will be enfolded in God’s grace revealed among us, and will be drawn to join us leaving everything behind to follow Christ.

Amen

* Hunter, George G., *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, p. 29.