

Gone Fish'n

"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him. (Mark 1:17-18)

January 25, 2009 Third Sunday after Epiphany (Third Sunday in Ordinary Time)

Lectionary citations

Jonah 3:1-5, 10
 Psalm 62:5-12
 1 Corinthians 7:29-31
 Mark 1:14-20

When we met on Monday, the preachers in my lectionary group struggled over how to preach today's Gospel creatively. There is a natural tendency to compare the wonderful fishermen, who dropped their nets and followed Jesus all the way to the cross, with today's busy people, who cannot reliably clear their busy schedules to even come to church on Sunday morning. That leads to a pastor ranting about how church members, rather than giving their all, have to be begged and wheedled into giving even a little time and money to the Church that Jesus founded. Preaching along these lines, the pastor starts sounding like a "Dutch Uncle" and I would assume that the folks in the pews would simply tune him out and spend the sermon time doodling or daydreaming about more interesting things.

It is a natural tendency for leaders of worthy causes, most of whom are paid to work full time for those causes, to criticize those who live in the real world for insufficient zeal and commitment to the cause. Although I wish Barack Obama the greatest success, he seems to have fallen into that trap in his inaugural address. I may be wrong, but I believe the words from that address that will be remembered is his little "Dutch Uncle" lecture about our irresponsibility. "Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some, but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age." I may not be the only one who hears echoes of President Jimmy Carter's famous "malaise" speech on the energy crisis in that turn of phrase. You may remember that speech was the one where President Carter asked Americans to save the country by driving 55 MPH and turning down their thermostats.

Therefore, my working assumption for this sermon is that you are all disciples, followers of Jesus, and that you have in fact given everything to Christ. You have been called, you heard the call, and you responded. You have already dropped your nets, left your boats, and have become fishers of people. You are all Christ's disciples.

We join the Church at our baptism. When I refer to the Church, I am talking about the capital “C” church, not any particular congregation or denomination. I would like us to consider the possibility that all those baptized into the Church are forgiven of their sins, are born again in Christ, and are saved for the Kingdom. This view of Baptism, that it is a saving sacrament, is traditionally the view of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. There are other views of Baptism, for example, the reformed view that baptism is a sign of the covenant between God and his people, the Church. However, in the UCC, we can choose whatever doctrine we are led to by the “still speaking” God. Today, let us consider the possibility that we are all saved by our baptism and reflect on what implications that belief would have for the Christian life.

Consider the possibility that it does not matter whether we are baptized as a baby or an adult, or how many years or days we live after our baptism. If we are baptized, it is a sign that God has selected us as one of his chosen people, the new Israel, the Church. We are redeemed, forgiven, and saved for the Kingdom of God. This is a done deal, signed, sealed, and delivered. Worrying about whether we are Kingdom bound is a waste of time and energy because God has already decided the issue.

Paul compared salvation to a transfer of authority. Before we were saved we were under the authority of Sin. We were ruled by sin and sin owned us; lock, stock and barrel. After we joined with Christ, we came under the absolute authority of God. Just as sin once owned us, God now holds our marker. Those who complain of Christian hypocrisy misunderstand what it means to be a Christian. To be a Christian means to be owned by Christ, to be part of his body. Being a Christian does not mean being nice, it means being saved. Being under Jesus' authority does not mean that we cannot be rebellious, resentful, and disobedient.

Yet at the same time, when we are saved, something in us dies, our sinful nature, and something in is raised from the dead, so that we begin a new life. We may begin that new life with all of our old bad habits, desires, resentments, and hurts, but those sinful things are no longer consistent with our fundamental nature. Instead of life wearing us down and dragging us deeper into sin, Christ is constantly lifting us up, pulling us towards righteousness and holiness. We have received this gift of grace, it is working away inside of us, molding us more and more towards the image of Christ, towards what human beings are really meant to be. The grace we have received makes us a very different people than we would have been if we had not been baptized into the Body of Christ.

Grace is granted to us through our relationship with Christ. Each of us has a direct and personal relationship with Christ by being members of his living body, the Church. It is by being part of the Church that we have a relationship with Christ. That relationship with Christ is lived out in our relationships with each other, with our brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ. It is by worship, fellowship, ministry, mission, and prayer with and for other members of the Body that we serve our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ.

We are empowered by the Holy Spirit for this life in the Church and the Spirit has given us gifts: prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, and showing mercy. Each of us has received

different gifts, according to the grace given each of us. As your Pastor, I see us using those gifts for the benefit of the Body of Christ every day.

We belong to Christ and should be led by the Spirit. Yet we can choose to reject the gifts of the Spirit, we can deny our membership in the Body of Christ, and we can give into our sinful desires. If we do this, we are still saved for the Kingdom, but we are living a lie. By living this lie, pretending that we are ruled by sin, when in fact we belong to the Spirit, we are missing the Joy of living that comes from walking with Christ. If we walk in harmony with who we really are and choose to be led by the Spirit we will receive the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

All us here today who belong to Christ are going to the Kingdom. That isn't something we really need to worry about. What we need to ask ourselves is whether we are doing all we can to deepen our relationship with Christ through the Church, whether we are fully using our spiritual gifts to build up the Church, and whether we are walking by the Spirit each day of our lives. If we choose to grow in the Spirit by turning our entire person mind, body, and spirit, towards Christ and his church, we will receive the fruits of the Spirit and enjoy life in a way we have never imagined possible, even through life's struggles, losses, and suffering.

I like to compare belonging to the Church, the Body of Christ, with being in a high school. When we are baptized, we are enrolled in Jesus' school. Disciples are pupils. Jesus is the principal. The Holy Spirit is the teacher. We have all enrolled in Jesus' school, the Church, and are all working through the program. The admissions officer, God, who enrolled us, selected us carefully. After all, this school has a 100 percent graduation rate. We are in this school for life. As we all know, there are plenty of tests along the way, and we have been told that there is a final "exit exam" administered by our principal in person. We will graduate from that school—even if we do not want to graduate and fight him every step of the way. All will pass, but not all will get the same grade.

The mission of our school is to give each of us a chance to use our gifts to build school spirit, enrich the life of the school, and bring more and more students into the program. There are many ways to contribute to the life of the school just as there are many gifts. Some of us may be stars on the football team or the valedictorian, but most of us give to the life of the school in smaller ways. Even the troublemakers and rebels add something to the life of the school.

The student who really misses out on the school experience is not the rebel or the troublemaker, but the student who simply does not participate. There are students who coast through high school, doing the minimum needed to pass their courses and graduate. They do not go out for sports, do not join any clubs, and do not distinguish themselves in any way. They do not even stand out by getting in trouble for disassembling the principal's car and reassembling it in a classroom or leaving a live cow in the principal's office. They do not develop any lasting friendships with other students or with their teachers. Their talents and abilities go undeveloped or undiscovered. For whatever reason, they are satisfied with moving through the halls like a ghost, avoiding anything that would make a lasting impression on himself

or herself or anyone else. Yet they still graduate. When the principal hands the diploma to such a student and shakes his or her hand, the principal must be thinking, "Who the heck is this?" Is this what we want to see when we look back at our school days?

All of us are going to see Christ face to face. He will judge us for our lives and he will forgive us for our sins. This much is certain. Nevertheless, plenty is left up to us. Do we want him to be proud of us for doing the best we could with what we were given, or do we want him to tell us how disappointed he is with us for wasting all the opportunities he gave us to live a joy-filled life in his Church. There is no hellfire and damnation awaiting us if we disappoint him. However, if we love Jesus, we might want to do our best to please him. After all, he loved us enough to die for each of us on the cross. Amen.

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