

Denice K. Leslie
February 4, 2007
Luke 5: 1 -11
I Corinthians 15: 1 – 11

“A God of New Life: Calls Even Us”

I have a great fishing story for you this morning! It's about Mark Twain. He “loved to boast of his hunting and fishing exploits.

Returning home after a three-week fishing trip deep in the heart of Maine—long after the state's fishing season had closed, Twain retired to the lounge car of his train in search of a suitable stranger to whom he might relate his fishing adventures.

Having struck up a friendly conversation with a prospective admirer, Twain soon found to his dismay that his boasts of a great catch elicited a grim reaction. Still Twain pressed on...

‘By the way, who are you, sir?’ he finally inquired. ‘I'm the game warden.’ The stranger growled. ‘Who are you?’

Twain nearly swallowed his cigar. ‘Well, to be perfectly truthful, warden,’ he answered, thinking of his catch of fish iced down in the baggage car, ‘I'm the biggest (expletive) liar in the whole United States!’¹

Fortunately for us Jesus is not a fish and game warden. Although Peter isn't quite so sure—is he? He gets pretty rattled by the big catch of fish and tells Jesus, “Go away from me Lord for I am a sinful man.”

But that's precisely the point. Jesus isn't calling perfect people, he's calling regular people—ordinary people like you and me. People who are perfectly comfortable going about their daily occupations, and who have no trouble feeling pretty competent at what they do to make a living—on the whole—but who at have no real idea of what the purpose of life is --not to mention who would feel like a fish out of water at actually finding themselves in the presence of God.

Not that they aren't looking, hungering for the divine—most of us just don't believe we

will actually find it. Even when it's incarnated right in front of us!

After all, we don't write books for bible book stores. We aren't likely candidates for an interview on a religious TV show. Those smiling, perfectly put together folks don't reflect our reality—definitely not all their easy God talk. We're a lot like Peter.

Peter has had a rough day or in this case night at work. We've all had that experience! He's put in a good effort and has nothing to show for it. Maybe he's beginning to wonder what the point is—maybe the fishing has been pretty spotty of late and he feels like he's just going through the motions. Is he wondering, as he searches his nets for tears, if this is all there is to life?

Jesus is standing on the shore line—and the crowd is pressing in on him hungering for the word of God. With the water to his back Jesus looks around and sees Peter and the others at work washing their nets.

Spying the empty boat he steps into one and asks Peter to take him out a little ways from the shore—where he sits down and teaches the crowd.

Teaches them what? We aren't told! The message here is that the content of what Jesus has to say is not as important as his presence. Who he is. And who that makes us.

You see Peter and James and John are all Jews. The Torah teaches them that nothing from the clay of the earth can look into the face of the Shaper of the universe and expect to survive—the very nature of God's divinity dwarfing and reducing all else to nothingness. Only a suitable intermediary—a spokesperson,—such as Moses, could bring God's word to the people. Think of a moth being incinerated by the light it is attracted to. And no one mistook Moses for God.

But when Peter, the tried and true experienced fisherman who fished all night and caught nothing, witnesses this great catch of fish he knows what he sees. He knows who Jesus is. And he knows who he is by comparison. And he is legitimately terrified.

¹ Homiletics, Feb. 2007, Illustrations, p. 50

Unlike the great prophet Moses whose gaze at the burning bush was his call from God to be God’s prophet, Peter sees himself as a moth worthy only of incineration! Definitely not of the Moses caliber! Not in his wildest dreams.

But Jesus sees him differently. He tells him, “Don’t be afraid—from now on you will be catching people.” Catching people. Catching—as in “capture alive” or “restore to life.”

Peter is captured by Jesus and restored to life! With Peter Jesus closes the ancient distance between the divine and mortal natures with the bridge of himself. Jesus is a person. The Person of the universe.

Lifting up and making whole our human nature in his flesh in such a way that when we look on him we see mirrored back our God imagined selves.

This is why Peter, James and John bring their boats ashore and leave everything behind. Because suddenly everything else in life pales by comparison. They’ve been out into life’s deeper water with Jesus. They’ve seen what’s below the surface—and maybe for the first time in a long time they believe there is something worth believing in. That there is a larger purpose to life. There is a reason for living because life is new again and they are new again.

“In a message called ‘Your Life’s Work,’ John Buchanan tells the story of author Dan Wakefield:

In mid-career, Wakefield seemed to be sinking into depression, anger and disillusionment. And then he met Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement and a half-way house in the Bowery of London.

Wakefield volunteered to help in the kitchen and wrote later about a ‘real mystique that called young people, offering in the midst of the grim poverty of the Bowery something that all the glittering affluence around us lacked—a sense of purpose, a way of transcending self through service.’”

Wakefield did not become a social worker, but he did become an intentional

Christian and returned to writing—his life’s work—but now with a sense that it was what God wanted him to do, had gifted him to do and had given him to do.”²

Wakefield was a fisherman without a catch. Jesus captured him and restored his life, giving him a larger, deeper, broader perspective about the purpose of life—a reason for writing, a reason for living greater than just himself.

Through Dorothy Day, Jesus brought Wakefield into relationship with others whose needs were different, but in a very real way equal to his own.

You see that’s the thing about Jesus—when he calls us to follow—we must not forget—its not just about us going out to catch others—its about US being captured and restored to life as well. The saving grace of it all is —with God it’s a win-win! The people we serve, serve us in turn because we are both in need.

I think that was the thing that struck me most this past eight days of naming people dear to us at their funerals. In Gladys, in Lynette, in Helen and in Julia we held heaven in our presence without even knowing it! They gave us so much and if they could stand here today, they would go on and on about how much God has given to them through others in this life.

Real, ordinary, loving people who in their daily walk did their best to love others as they have been loved by God. Each one of these women’s lives was a testament to the joy of God’s life giving love. Their faith was at the core of their lives—shaped them—shaped the way they chose to use their time and treasure, relate to the people around them and their priorities in life. And none of them was a self-proclaimed evangelist—they were just plain faithful.

None of these four souls is going to be recorded in Who’s Who—but their names are recorded in God’s book of life written large on our lives by all they have contributed to their

² Ibid. p. 51

families, their communities, their church and to all of us! If you think about it, all of us who knew them and benefited from our relationship with them are like that miraculous catch of fish Peter witnessed.

Because we saw Christ reflected in them, just as Peter saw his God-imagined self reflected in Jesus, we know our burning bushes aren't Dream Works spectacles—but the stuff of every day life: chocolate chip cookies baked with a grandchild or baked for a house full of graduate students accompanied by wit and good humor and a life long relationship of loving care; a dedication to spreading the word about the Town Hall lecture series that brings a broader sense of the world and a deeper understanding of complex issues affecting us all; the dedication of the skill of merchandising and a passion for helping the less fortunate turned in retirement to the creation of this church's Mission Thrift Store; the constancy of a loving mother and grandmother expressed daily in such simple things as home made apple sauce, and the gift of time and loving attention for children, each and every one named in prayer daily on bended knees.

As we prepare to come to the table of the Risen Christ this morning, may our lives be open to his real presence that our hearts and minds may be captured anew—that we may be dismissed refreshed and restored to go out there and, in whatever we do, live our lives for him.