

## ***Catching People??***

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Scripture: Luke 5:1-120

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

New Testament scholar Jeffrey John says in his book *The Meaning in the Miracles*, that Gospel miracle stories are more than an awe-inspiring event; they say something about Jesus' mission and, more often than not, they concern people who are outside the accepted social and religious structures.<sup>1</sup>

That certainly seems the case in the passage today. Following along the Journey with Jesus this year with Luke, today we find him followed by crowds. Jesus asks Simon Peter if he will take him out into the Lake. What Jesus teaches the crowds from the boat, we don't know. The focus shifts to Simon Peter.

Now take a moment here, on the boat with Jesus, with Simon Peter, and the two others named later, James and John. These are career fishers. It's their livelihood, their small business. In the Gospels, Jesus picks disciples, not because of their skills, but because of their willingness to let go of their attachments and follow this radical emissary of the Creator in proclaiming to the world that the kin-dom of God is near. For a fisherperson, that would seem pretty outlandish. It is always helpful, then, to perform a miracle as Jesus does, asking Simon Peter, "How about putting the nets out again." Simon protests, but listens to Jesus in spite of his pride, having fished for hours with nothing to show for it.

The haul is beyond belief, in fact too much for the nets. This is an ancient fishing story, you know, like the stories we hear about – the fish uncle Tim caught, that was this big. It might be exaggerated, it might not be. It's a story of wonder and amazement.

For the storyteller Luke, it was about the multitudes who would soon choose to drop what they were doing to follow in response to the preaching, healing of disciples like Peter, James and John. Peter, James and John – peasant fishing folk, none of whom, I would venture to guess, felt well equipped to be in the business of catching people.

Catching people. What an image. At first glance for me, it is not one that inspires me. I was relieved to find out that as one digs into the Greek, that it doesn't at all mean fishing as for animals. "Catching people" does not at all capture the true meaning of the Greek words. Jesus is saying to Peter that he will be "saving men and women... alive" for the kingdom. The Christian mission in Luke's time as he told this story is to rescue people from seeming spiritual death.<sup>2</sup> Pretty lofty idea, isn't it?

With such intense language, I think the storyteller Luke is provoking us to truly interpret in a dynamic way what this endeavour of "catching" people is for us as Christians in these post modern, religion-averse times. My experience of a lifetime in churches tells me that we can easily lose sight of this mission of Jesus, as we get ready report the

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Eaton. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

membership statistics and our goings-on from 2018 in our Annual Report at St. Andrew's. Just as we need to peel away the layers of meaning from this Gospel story and the story of Isaiah's call in order find the deeper meaning rich with symbolism...

We also need to peel away the layers of our self understanding as St. Andrew's United Church, what we are truly doing here. And as Christians, individuals and teams, truly we are making a difference, changing lives, our lives too. That's great.

But what Luke invites us to ask is this deeper question: What is our Creator doing in this place, in our lives? Because the Gospel story of Jesus calling Simon Peter is about a fisher, who, by his own testimony, does not feel qualified for a sudden change of profession. The Spirit did Peter's retraining. But the holy work in Peter couldn't start, apparently, without a gesture of deep humility. Peter on his knees.

There is a parallel there with the Hebrew Scripture prophet Isaiah. Isaiah, overwhelmed by the vision he felt privileged to see, didn't feel worthy. Didn't feel up to the task.

That is at the heart of God's holy mission: It begins with the people we least expect. They themselves do not suspect that the Spirit will call them! Sometimes we are those people God calls.

Eduard Schweizer said that faith does not come as assent to statements previously preached, but as trust in Jesus' call to try once more, contrary to all dictates of reason.<sup>3</sup> To say yes to Jesus today, as Peter dropped his nets – full of fish I might remind you, that was a valuable haul left on the shore as he and James and John left with Jesus – to say yes to Jesus today requires first a posture of humility in us; we cannot flourish in this life without the Holy Spirit's work. Secondly, following Jesus requires enormous trust.

Two of the most transformational journeys in my life were into profoundly unfamiliar places for me. The first was my work in federal prisons. I had to learn a whole new vocabulary, not to mention I developed a swagger in my walk.

But I also learned the importance, sometimes, of bluntness. Truth. Saying it. Asking honest questions that might hurt, but which might open myself and others to new possibility.

My other transformational experience was in the Middle East. I still have only mediocre knowledge about language, culture, and the very complex political situation there. But I learned about resiliency of faith, Christian, Jewish, Muslim. Religion can be co-opted to do great harm, but faith, truly following the voice of the Prince of Peace, has called courageous people to resist human political power in order to break down walls, to stand with the very people that their parents might have called enemies.

When our Creator gets to work catching people in the Spirit, inviting them to follow, to accomplish seemingly impossible things – well, look out.

Are there moments in your history, aspects of your life, where you once found yourself stepping out of your comfort zone? Maybe you had no choice, you had to face an enormous challenge or you would be sunk by it? In order to make a difference, a far

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

greater challenge is to identify how God has taken what you would call your liability; taking that liability, that weakness, and helped you to see that it is our vulnerabilities, paradoxically, that change the world.

In Luke's later work, the book of Acts, he tells the story of Saul, the powerful persecutor of Jesus followers, transformed into Paul – a powerful speaker and letter writer, but who spoke of how God used the foolish to teach the wise. I'm glad to hear that, because sometimes I feel pretty foolish, and when I'm feeling just a bit too wise, I know the humbling is coming.

In this Black Heritage Month I am learning a little about the abolition of slavery in the U.S. and what an extraordinary story it is of Harriet Tubman. Born a slave in Maryland in 1822, she was beaten by various slave owners as a child, and she was hit in the head by a heavy metal weight. She coped with dizziness and pain, and sometimes strange visions. Being Christian, she attributed some of those dreams to God. Most of us know that she helped build the underground railroad. But I didn't appreciate the details of this mission of hers: She made 13 missions helping, it is reported, approximately 70 slaves including family and friends to freedom using the underground railroad. She got affectionately nicknamed Moses for this work.

The Good News is that we don't have to be strong, or smart, or self reliant. In fact, it might be a liability to rely on ourselves. Humble, vulnerable, even sometimes ignorant you and I. The Holy Spirit has work for us; no previous experience or skills required. Whew!!! Catching people is not an evangelical program to bring people into Church. It is first about Jesus calling us out of our humdrum spiritual lives, and breathing new life, passion, imagination into our everyday living. Doesn't that sound wonderful? Then, if we heed our Scriptures, we go out into our lives and allow God to work through us to enliven those around us...Not through our brilliance, but through our heartfelt, sincere testimonial of God's saving grace in our lives.

That's it. The Good News: Jesus is calling. Are you answering?