

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

by Rev. Emily Chapman

February 7, 2010

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



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Lectionary Texts:

Isaiah 6:1-8 (9-13); Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

⁵Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.”

⁶When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

⁹For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.”

¹¹When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Growing up, there were some words we weren’t allowed to say. My parents were big believers in the power of words and taught us that words like “stupid” and “shut up” were beneath us, along with the more obvious four-letter words that were definitely unacceptable in our house. I have learned that these are pretty common rules in many homes. In fact, a friend of mine tells the story of her own childhood experience with words she was not supposed to say. It seems she had had a tough day on the playground at school one day and was very angry with one classmate for picking on another one. When she got in the car with her mother at the end of the day, she

told her mother she was so mad that she just wanted to say “dumb dumb stupid shut up!”

There is just something about saying something you shouldn't, something delightfully transgressive about saying aloud something one really ought not say if they want to be accepted by polite society — or in her case, by her mother. With that in mind, I am going to discuss today, the ten-letter word that we avoid in churches these days.

We don't like it at all, because we think sometimes it makes us sound arrogant, like we know something everyone else doesn't know. We don't like it this word because we think it sounds aggressive and intolerant. We do not use it sometimes because we are too embarrassed to fully advocate our tradition in such a way. And often, if we are honest, this ten-letter word is not used because we just don't really want to be associated with people who use it a lot. The ten-letter word that is my topic this morning is that dreaded word in so much of mainline Christianity today — *evangelism*.

Now I am open to the critique that I have gone too far in my assessment, but my guess is that most of us would agree that we are rather uncomfortable with talking about evangelism, in spite of the fact that it is one of the most crucial tasks to which Jesus has called us. Dozens of factors have gone into making evangelism a “four-letter word” these days, and I know enough to know there isn't much I can do to change that in a twelve-minute sermon. But it is my prayer that as we look at this story of Jesus together we can begin a transformation in our minds of the blessing and responsibility that we have as those entrusted to be evangelists — bearers of the Good News.

One of the first things we have to do is get rid of the stigma. Luckily, Peter gives us a model for this. His first response to the call of Christ is to fall to his knees and proclaim his sinfulness. We, too, must begin with repentance. We must repent of the many ways our message has been distorted, has failed to point to the love and power of Jesus. We must repent of the way our life together as the Church has become a mess of disputes, pettiness, and finger pointing, and has failed to be an example of

the grace of Jesus among us. All of this has contributed to our fear of evangelism. So we begin where Peter began, with confession.

But from there, we look to what Jesus says. Jesus goes to Peter, James, and John, whom he already knew. Perhaps this is at least a brief lesson in how the best evangelism happens — in trusted relationships, making it as much about listening as it is about speaking. Because they were in relationship already, they could respond to Jesus' message for them.

After he demonstrates his power and his desire to provide all things in abundance, Jesus tells them to abandon all that they have, including the miraculous catch of fish they just got, and go fish for people. Another hang up, at least to me. Fish for people sounds a little like entrapment to me...after all, getting lured and caught doesn't seem to work out so well for the fish. It feels like a trick. It is important that we remember we do not ultimately fish for the sake of the fish (though we hope that those who hear the good news benefit). It is really for the sake of the Church, that the Church might live as fully as possible into our calling — and that “calling is not to hook people and drag them in; it is rather to cast the net of God's love all around — open to all the world — and then wait with patience for the Spirit's work and to see if any are caught by God's vision and grace.”

This understanding of fishing, of casting a wide net of God's love all around, is crucial to a right reading of this passage. When we think of evangelism, we may think of people with pamphlets describing how to be saved, someone preaching hellfire and brimstone, trying to get as many converts as possible. Now do not hear me demonizing those who engage in types of evangelism that we do not here. There are commendable things showing courage and conviction about their beliefs. And, I suspect there are many in this room who came to know Christ for the first time by one of these means.

However, there is a great deal more to bringing the Good News than convincing someone that it's better to go to Heaven than Hell, which has generally been what the conversation is about. Most evangelism that we think of is about answering the question “if you die tomorrow, where will you go?” But the real question is more

about “if you wake up tomorrow and are in fact, still alive, how are you going to live?” It’s about bringing Good News that is good news both right now and in the future. Thus, evangelism cannot be a numbers game, cannot be a scare tactic, cannot be a one-time conversion. There is more to it than that.

When we cast a wide net, when we invite everyone around us to encounter the grace and love of Christ in the community of the Church, both fish and fisherman are transformed by the process of initiating people into the holy life of Christ and into the Church. And the ways we do that may vary. We do that by helping people heal from violence, or by being a family for someone who has no family, or by responding to someone’s anger with love. What would it mean to reject a view of evangelism that is solely concerned with the afterlife and instead turn toward a living transformation that takes place in this life and also always points to the life to come. That is what evangelism really is — seeing God’s presence and work in the world and pointing it out to those who do not yet have eyes to see — it’s seeing a sign of hope and saying “Look . See that. That’s how God wants us to live together.

So then, our evangelism becomes point to Christ and saying,

“that’s the one I am following, and it cost everything. But it’s worth it.

“Why don’t you join me? You can help me and I can help you.”

There is nothing arrogant about this reaching out to build community, nothing imperialistic about pointing to the Kingdom of God in this world and the world to come, nothing manipulative about a commitment to humble service together, and nothing coercive about calling attention to this community when others become curious. It is a gift to be called to share the Good News with the world, to be called to the task of evangelism. What’s more, without evangelism, there is no church and there is no way to be a disciple of Jesus.

No matter how we think of it, it can be a daunting task to us who still may not be excited to leave everything behind to go fish for people. But it is our charge as God’s people the Church, and God has not left us to fend for ourselves. For in the same breath Jesus told us to make disciples of all nations, he promised “surely I am with you always to the end of the age.”