

WHEN THE FISH AREN'T BITING

Sermon preached by The Rev. Barbara E. Davis

February 7, 2010

Scripture: Luke 5:1-11; Isaiah 6:1-8

When I was about nine years old, my brother David decided it was time to teach my brother Donald and me the finer points of fishing. Donald was about fifteen at the time and both of us knew two main things about my brother David – he was the prankster of the family and his passion for fishing was no joke. David was in his thirties at the time and he chose to take us fishing at place full of family history, a small lake where my family had lived during his adolescence and where he had spent many summers enjoying fishing from its shores.

I went happily along on this adventure because anything my brothers did was worthy of my attention. My brother Donald, being a teenager, no doubt had an endless list of other things he would have preferred to be doing. Aside from teasing me, my brothers' interests could not have been more divergent. David would have fit in well with the vocation of the sons of Zebedee, but “sports” – including outdoor sports like fishing – held no interest for my brother Donald. Even to this day, references to events like the Super Bowl illicit one of his favorite jokes, “that’s a game where they throw a ball in the basket, right?” Fishing references would not even merit a joke.

Nonetheless, off we went to learn the basics of fishing rods, lines, hooks, and bobbers to be followed by the more advanced techniques of hooking the worm and casting. Along with the challenges of developing these latter two skills without seeing the worm flying in one direction and the hook snagging on a nearby tree branch, I was completely unprepared for the most important fishing skill, patience. We started our endeavor in the late afternoon, just after the heat of the day, fishing for an elusive fish called a Bluegill. Waiting and being quiet were not my idea of fun. I was interested in sports that involved jumping, running, kicking, catching, and yelling if necessary. Seeing that fishing held none of this excitement, even in “practicing,” my interest declined. As the sun began its descent into the horizon I must have asked a thousand times when it was time to go home. My brother David engaged these pleas by moving us strategically from place to place around the lake, looking for a place where the wind and shade was just right to find fish that were interested in taking our bait.

My most lasting memory about that first fishing trip is my brother David laughing at me as we finally unhooked the first bluegill of the evening and I asked him if we could stay and fish a little longer. “I thought you were tired and wanted to go home!” he joked happily helping me cast the lines into the water again. Suddenly I was not hungry or tired, I just wanted to keep trying this exciting new sport. Now that the fish were biting, it was me who was hooked.

When the fish aren't biting, the aching in our muscles is more pronounced and we hear every growl in our stomach. It's hard to sustain our interest in our work, and everything besides fishing is of renewed interest. When I hear this passage Sorrel read for us from Luke's gospel, I can't help but marvel at the endurance of these fishermen for their trade. No doubt the words of this itinerate preacher were a welcome distraction since the fish weren't biting. Imagine their

exhilaration at seeing the huge haul of fish that they catch when Jesus tells them where to cast their nets. It is little wonder that they decide to follow this preacher who has used their boat as a pulpit.

The call of the first disciples is a familiar biblical story. The gospel of Luke contains a number of familiar elements and several unique twists. When we think of the disciples being called, we most often think of this setting as Luke's gospel depicts it, Jesus alongside a body of water making an appeal to nearby fishermen to join him and "fish for people." Both Mark's and Matthew's gospels describe the scene the same way, seaside, with a cast of potential disciples including Peter, Andrew his brother, James and his brother John (see Mark 1:16-20 and Matthew 4:18-21). The other consistent factor in each of these accounts is the quick, almost compulsive decision by these fishermen to follow Jesus. They respond with immediacy and without turning back.

John's gospel is the only one to give us a call to discipleship that is neither about fishing nor immediacy (see John 1:35-42). Instead, John the Baptist points Jesus out as "the lamb of God" and several people follow him out of curiosity. Those who follow him sit with Jesus a whole day in the place where he is staying, listening and assessing his teachings. They leave after that day convinced that John the Baptist is correct and act as agents to help recruit other followers.

In Luke's gospel, the call of the disciples happens slightly later in the unfolding of Jesus' ministry. Luke's gospel begins with the birth narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus and then moves onto John's ministry and Jesus' time in the wilderness, before telling of Jesus' early ministry. Unlike the other gospels, where Jesus calls the disciples before he teaches or heals or really begins his ministry, in Luke's gospel Jesus has already taught in the synagogue in Nazareth, cast out demons, and healed the sick. Huge crowds were already following him before he challenges these fishermen on the Sea of Galilee to follow him.

We enter Luke's gospel this morning, at that moment, with crowds pressing on Jesus so vigorously, he moves off the shore and into Peter's boat to speak to them. The miracle of the fish that is described in verses four through seven catches us off guard. We don't realize right away that Jesus is moving from preaching to fishing in order to catch these disciples. The miracle of the large catch of fish is unique to the call to discipleship narratives but it is not unique within the gospels. John's gospel also depicts such an event, but the writer places it after Jesus' resurrection when the fishermen have returned to their work on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is not with them on the boat but is on the shore and calls out instructions, "Children, you have no fish, have you? Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some" (see John 21:3-8). These fish in John's gospel not only become breakfast, but they become a window of recognition through which the disciples see the risen Lord.

Although set in different points in his life, both versions of this fish story are epiphanies, giving clarity to who Jesus is to those around him. There are many reasons why Luke's gospel may have placed this story earlier in the narrative, including that this gospel has the disciples remain in Jerusalem after Jesus death and resurrection until the festival of Pentecost; they are not encouraged to go to Galilee and wait for Jesus there, as they are in the other gospels.¹

The unique placement of this miracle with the call of the disciples makes us wonder what the writer of Luke's gospel was interested in conveying about discipleship? Jesus obviously had large groups of followers already, so this fish story is not a form of enticement to gain followers. There were plenty of people ready and willing to follow, why single out these seemingly disinterested fishermen to leave everything and work with him to catch people? Surely among the crowds already pressing on him there were people leading similar lives of trade and hands-on work. Surely among these crowds already pressing in on him were people as aware of their sin as Peter professes. One commentator on this passage briefly notes that there is nothing these fishermen do to merit the call.² This glimpse of grace tells us something quite valuable about the gospel of Luke's understanding of discipleship. Disciples are not called because of what they have already done, or even because of any special potential. Disciples are called by the grace of God.

Likewise with us, we are not called to be disciples because of what we have to offer God, but because of what God has to offer us. Grace brings us to this moment, not because we are worthy, but because we are called. In a few moments, we will ordain and install a new class of church officers, elders, deacons and trustees.

The work ahead for these leaders and their colleagues are full of challenges. All of the officers who are rotating off of these boards will tell you that their service was not without challenges, ones they anticipated and ones they did not. They will also tell you that there were countless moments of joy and growth that have inspired and changed them in more ways than they can explain.

These new officers are not the only ones called today; in fact each of us is asked to listen for our call this morning. Some of you are being called in particular ways in the congregation, as committee members, as church schoolteachers, as volunteers for the kitchen committee or mission work, or to participate in our annual First Serves event in early March. Some of you are being called to relate to your work in new ways, either giving more and more or scaling back. The call to some is to respond to needs in the family, a sick parent, or child, or sibling needs extra care. Some of you are aware of already being in the middle of a call that is presenting challenges; today you are called to consider, "where do I go from here?" A balance is needed in the many aspects of your life; you feel it in your heart, where you are needed to follow the call. The challenges of today's world are great; economic difficulties, job security, illness, world concerns around violence and politics and natural disasters consume our spiritual energy and everywhere we turn more is needed from us.

The call to discipleship cannot always be embraced with the certainty of the first fishermen or clearly demonstrated with seraphs or nets full of fish. Sometimes the fish aren't biting at all. We are hungry, we want to go home, we want to get back to your usual routine, the challenges of the call are too great, the joys too few. Yet it is within the exhaustion and within the routine where we hear God's call the loudest. Isaiah's call happens in the most sacred of spaces, but one scholar describes it as "exploding the limitations of sacred space."³ Grace explodes the limitations of whatever is holding us back from responding to our call today.

Grace tugs at us, like a fish on the line, bobbing back to the surface over and over until we cannot ignore it anymore. We answer God's call not because we feel we have earned the opportunity or because we believe the fish will be biting on every cast. On the contrary, we respond because we know the challenges go hand in hand with the joys. One of our greatest resources is each other. We know the work of discipleship will call on our patience, our resilience, our ability to work together, and our trust in God's grace. Whatever challenges we face in the call we each hear today, grace promises us that the moments of joy and growth will also be part of experience, even when the challenges seem insurmountable. The fish may not be biting, but God's grace is nibbling at our hook and a voice is calling us, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Shall we answer? Yes, with God's grace.

¹ Culpepper, R. Alan “The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in The New Interpreter’s Bible, vol. IX. (Abingdon Press; Nashville, TN: 1995), p. 117.

² Ibid, p. 118.

³ Seitz, Christopher R. Isaiah 1-39. (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY: 1993), p. 54.