

Casting Our Nets©

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

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Dr. Sharlyn Gates

There is a similarity in the messages that we hear today, both in the Isaiah text and in the gospel lesson from Luke. Both passages can be titled “Call Stories.”

Isaiah and Peter each have an experience of being in the presence of the Divine and both are called to serve the Lord. And, at the moment in which they understand whose presence they are in, each of them confesses that they are unworthy of being close to God.

Isaiah, the prophet, tells about his vision of seeing the Lord God in all his glory ... the train of his robe filling the whole temple. Angels were there, singing “holy, holy... holy is the Lord of hosts ... the whole earth is filled with his glory!” If you weren’t a believer before, seeing a vision like that, would surely change your mind!

Isaiah immediately realizes his unworthiness and cries out “woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips and I live among people who are unclean.” Remember, that in Isaiah’s day, the belief was that if one were to see the face of God, that person would surely die.

But one of the angels takes a hot coal and touches Isaiah’s lips and he is made clean by this act. And the question comes ... “whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” And Isaiah does not hesitate, even for a moment. He cries out, “Here I am! Send me!”

Then we go to Luke’s gospel where Jesus enters the scene with these fisherman, and from that day on, their lives would never be the same.

And, like Isaiah, when Peter realizes that this one is the Lord, this is someone different, who can make a net full of fish, when there had been none before ... he immediately thought of his unworthiness and he cried out ... “go away from me, Lord. For I am a sinner!”

Yet, Jesus made it clear that Peter and those like him ... all regular, ordinary, imperfect people ... were the ones whom Jesus wanted to be his helpers and his friends.

“If you think you’ve seen something with this big catch of fish,” Jesus is saying, “just wait ‘til you see what you will catch by following me! You will be fishers of people!”

And they left it all ... their boats, their fishing equipment, which was their life’s work, everything they were familiar with, and all those fish ... the biggest catch ever! ... to follow Jesus.

God uses ordinary sinners like you and me for God’s purpose. We have been cleansed and made new and yet we are ordinary and we can relate to all the other ordinary folks in our world.

But sometimes I wonder if that's still true today, at least for us as a part of the mainline church – the church we know and love.

Each time I read this fishing story about Jesus and the disciples, I think of the time that Fred and I went fishing at Roaring River, in Missouri. It was one of those fishing hatcheries and we bought poles and bait that we were told would be just the thing. And when the whistle blew, in the ungodly hour of five in the morning, we were standing there in a row of many other fishermen, ready to throw in our lines.

I'm telling you, there were thousands of trout swimming by our hooks. So many of them, they could not help but bump into each other and into our bait. But do you think any one of them would bite?

Yes, of course they did! People to our right and to our left, and people across the way ... all were catching trout! But in all that time, each morning we were there, we never got one fish! We never had one bite!

It was discouraging, frustrating and soon we just gave up. Fishing wasn't for us, it seemed.

Sometimes I think that is similar to where we are in the mainline church today. We know there are lots of fish out there, but they seem to just swim right past us. Our nets are never very full.

We do see some of those other fishermen ... other churches ... that seem to have full nets, lots of people going there, and it gets discouraging at times, as we try to faithfully persevere.

With the fast and huge changes in our culture over the last few years, doesn't it seem like the fish have changed? The food they need is the same ... Scriptures, the message, the faith, the sacraments ... but it seems that, perhaps the ways of offering that food needs to be different.

Does it need to be more in relationship to how younger people learn, how they comprehend things? Maybe more experiential, more visual, more personal?

Over the years that I have been here we've tried some new things, haven't we? And I think we all believe they are positive things. We have the AV system that gives us visuals. Maybe it needs to be utilized in different ways?

We have the ability to have contemporary music although we do not have a big praise band like some churches do. Yet I'm not convinced that that is the biggest attraction. And I really don't believe that people just want entertainment either. People who lean toward very contemporary styles of worship, I believe, are finding food for the hunger they have for God.

As a member of the Commission on Ministry in our presbytery I know that there are many Presbyterian Churches that have declined in membership. Yet I think it is important for us to realize this: we would not be here, if God had not called us to be here.

Holly Presbyterian Church has been a faithful people of God for over 150 years, in this community. What we have done, most of the time, has been effective in being a part of the Great Fishing Story. The church is a people called out by God to serve, to teach and most of all, to make new disciples ... to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.

But if the fish have changed, then the challenge is a big one for a church that is steeped in tradition. And the question for us is: how important is it that we reach those who seemed unreachable? How willing are we to be bold in sharing our faith in a new way? In learning how to do that effectively? How much are we willing to change for the sake of bringing people to Christ? Because change is hard, especially when you have no idea what that change looks like.

Joseph Fort Newton, in speaking to a group of ministers and seminary students, said this: "Our business is not to do something *for* the church. But rather, to do something *with* the church."

In other words, our most important call is not about growing a particular church in numbers. Most important of all, we are called to *be* the church – to give ourselves for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ, to go out and serve others, to share God's love, to offer the bread of life to a world of people who are hungry for God, whether they know it or not. Of course, offering a place of worship, fellowship and bible study are essential to the spiritual growth of believers.

When Isaiah said to God, "Here am I, send me!" He had no idea just how tough it would be. He was a prophet in Judah at a time when the people had become hard hearted toward God, and God's patience was finally getting short.

When Simon Peter and James and John, left what they knew ... left all that they had trusted in, all that was comfortable and familiar ... to follow Jesus, they had no idea how their lives would change, how their hearts would break as they followed Jesus all the way to the cross, and to their own eventual deaths. Yet, they were faithful in following him.

It feels like we, as the mainline church in the 21st Century, have been out all night, fishing. Yet, lately, we seem to be coming in with nets that are mostly empty. Many of us are tired. We are discouraged. We get downhearted and tend to be pessimistic, at times. And sometimes we just feel like giving up.

Still, Jesus comes to us and invites us to follow him ... in this new day ... to leave our nets ... the familiar ways that we've been comfortable with, the things we've known to work before. Jesus still says, "follow me, and I *will* make you fishers of people."

We are faced today with that challenge ... and that decision ... to follow him into a new and uncertain world. Like the disciples of old, we must be adventurous, we must be bold

and willing to step out in faith, to go where Jesus leads, to trust that, while we can't see the future, Jesus can.

One thing is for sure, we cannot put our focus inward, expecting that many will come in to us, to be like us. But if we follow the call to do something *with* the church ... that is, allow ourselves to be made new for the outward purpose of spreading the gospel, we may be very surprised at how full our nets become.

Truthfully, being the church is about being the best, most hospitable, welcoming community of faith we can be. That means being willing to serve as someone who lovingly greets people as they come in, who is faithful in taking a turn at ushering and getting things ready for worship; being willing to serve on a ministry team so that the church is strong in our ministries - both inside and outside the doors. It means giving time to our mission – like the baby pantry – because that is a place where those come in our doors are met with love and compassion.

Being the church means having meaningful worship, committing to bible studies so we grow in our knowledge of the biblical truths, it means being a community in prayer, and it means participating in the fellowship of believers. Because as we reach out to people, we must be the best we can be when they come to join us here. We must be good stewards of our time, our talents and our tithes sharing all of those in the church.

None of us know where Jesus will lead us next, but we can be sure it will be into a life full of joy in good times, comfort and encouragement in difficult times, and many blessings on the journey!

Let us not be discouraged, brothers and sisters in Christ. Let us pray daily for God's angels to touch our lips as they did the lips of Isaiah so that we might be bold to share the message of salvation to all, believing they are hungry for it.

Let us not be afraid of the next chapter in the life of Holly Presbyterian Church, for God is still here, leading, guiding, calling. It may look different, it may be a new way with a totally new kind of leader whom God sends just for a time like this. But we can trust, with God, it will be good.

Let us continue to answer the call ... "Here am I! Send me!"