

2.6.22

Like most children, I did not like waking up early in the morning. The only notable exception to this rule that I remember well today was the excitement I would feel waking up to play baseball, or go fishing, usually with my grandfather. You have to be an early riser to have a successful day of fishing, especially where I grew up in Arizona. By the time the midmorning sun rises over one of the lakes or streams in the high country north of Phoenix, it is far too late to catch any fish. Cool morning air is replaced by intense high-desert, mountain sun. Fish stop eating, and are nowhere near the surface of the water. As I was preparing for this sermon, I could not think of a single time when I caught a fish after 10 in the morning and 4 in the afternoon.

The mid-morning sun was rising at the lake of Gennesaret, a 13 mile long and 6 mile wide desert lake surrounded by subtropical vegetation and small fishing settlements at the time of Jesus, also called the sea of Galilee. Unlike the high elevation lakes and streams some of us may have fished in the West, the lake of Gennesaret is the lowest freshwater lake in the world in terms of elevation, sitting between 600 and 700 feet below sea level. Fishermen were ending their night's work and bringing in their boats as their efforts to catch fish grew in futility with the rising sun. Jesus was there, and he was so overwhelmed by a crowd hungering to hear the Word of God from his lips that he needed to borrow a boat from Simon the fisherman to give himself enough space to sit down and teach. He taught the crowds from Simon's boat for a while, and finally looked to Simon and said, "put out into the deep, and let down your nets for a catch."

Simon knows fishing. "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing!" We have been fishing from dusk to dawn and caught nothing. Clearly, we are not going to catch anything at this hour, when the conditions are even worse for catching fish. "But," in spite of the conditions

which make your request ridiculous, because you are the one who asks, Simon says, “at your word I will let down the nets.”

We know the rest of this story. The fishermen catch such a tremendous load of fish that they cannot pull the nets in, and their nets are breaking. When they do pull in the nets, their boats start to sink. Knowing full well that this violates the time-tested universal laws of fishing Simon responds in terror: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

One curiosity about this story is the way that Simon is called both Simon and Simon-Peter in it. The Gospel of John switches between different names for Simon all the time, as a sign that Simon recognizes something profound about Jesus by faith. In Luke’s Gospel, Simon is only referred to as both Simon and Simon-Peter in one story, and it is this story of the miraculous fishing trip, a story which is also only told in John and Luke. So it is here that as Simon falls to Jesus’ knees, he is called Simon-Peter, in anticipation of the name that he will be given because of his faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus says to Simon, “do not be afraid.” I find this frequent admonition from Scripture to be somewhat insensitive and ironic, because it is always a sign that the person who is afraid has every right to be afraid, as they are in the presence of divine power. Jesus continues, “do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” I do not know about you, but I do not find that promise to be all that comforting, and I do not imagine these first disciples did either. What does that even mean? If I shake in fear because you have mysteriously us an abundance of fish at a time and place when all of the conditions for catching fish are wrong, why would it comfort me to catch men? Nonetheless, we are told the disciples “left everything and followed him.”

As we continue in St. Luke’s Gospel in this lectionary year C, we should know that the book of Luke and the Book of Acts were first written as one book. This one book, divided into

two books so that Luke would be counted with the Gospels, and Acts as the history book of the early church, takes up one-quarter of the New Testament. Luke is the story of the life of Christ, Acts is the story of the life of the Church. The author of Luke and Acts goes to great lengths to connect the events of the life of Christ, and to show how they parallel the life of the church. As Christians read Acts throughout history then, they are to think “this is my story,” and they are to read Luke and say, “Jesus said this would be my story.” This means that, as much as we may like to think that loving Jesus and not the church is an option, the life of Jesus Christ and the life of the Church are bound together as one. The story of Jesus is the story of the church, and the story of the church is the story of Jesus. Archbishop Arthur Michael Ramsey says that we cannot really know Jesus “unless we know his church, and its life as part of his own life” Why should we have anything to do with the church unless this is so?

The book of Acts is all about how Jesus fulfills this promise made to Simon Peter and his fellow disciples, that they would become fishers of men precisely at when all of the conditions for catching men were wrong. Consider the condition of the message itself. “Come, follow the savior of the world. He was a crucified peasant, you are called to live and die like him. The good news is that He rose from the dead, something no one has ever seen before, and the first eyewitnesses to this resurrection were a group of women, whose witness our culture does not trust. Most of our founders were murdered. Whose with me?”

Yet it is this unattractive message of God’s gracious victory that draws in a woman possessed by a demon, the centurion, Cornelius, and a state-sponsored terrorist whose mission was to kill Christians, who becomes the first Apostle to the Gentiles, St. Paul, among many others. The church, which has always been depicted by a ship, also struggled under the weight of

these early scandalous conversions, and does so still, just as the fisherman struggled to keep their ships afloat with fish.

Consider also the conditions of the world at the time this Gospel message was spreading. We have preserved today the letters of a Roman governor named Pliny the Younger, written to the Emperor Trajan in the early 100's. Pliny writes with concern and frustration about a "depraved superstition," saying "the contagion of this superstition has spread not only in the cities, but in the villages and rural districts as well," and "it seems incapable of being checked and set right." The depraved superstition is the worship of the crucified God. No matter how many Christians we kill, torture, or humiliate, the church keeps growing, undermining Roman society. Pliny recognizes, like the disciples at the lake, that the conditions for this faith are like the conditions for catching fish, not good. Why then, is it growing?

Consider the dysfunctional condition of the church itself, both at the time of the New Testament and throughout history. The reason we have most of the New Testament is because Paul had to write letters to churches that were behaving dysfunctionally. The church throughout history is always staggering between having no power at all and suffering, or wielding power stupidly and causing suffering. There is a caricature of seminary as a place where people lose their faith because they study Biblical criticism, or something like that. Many of those who lose their faith in seminary do so because they study church history for the first time. Historically speaking, the existence of the church does not make any sense. Its growth is even more impossible.

The Church is possible because God is with us in Jesus Christ, and only because God is with us in Jesus Christ. The only relevant condition on the Lake of Gennesaret leading to an abundance of fish was God with the disciples. The only condition that matters in our lives as

God's people is the same, the presence of God with us in Jesus Christ. The same word given to Gideon as he laments the status of his people is the word given to us, "But, I will be with you." I will be with you. As many times as we hear that promise in Scripture, we know that it is always fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who is himself God with us, now and forever. The only condition of which we need to be concerned is the presence of Jesus Christ with us, especially when it comes to the growth of Christian faith.

In the year 1910, the mainline churches of Europe and North America held a massive missionary conference in Edinburgh, Scotland. It was called the "World Missionary Conference," with the subtitle, "The Evangelization of the World in this Generation." What was argued at this gathering was that Europe and North America had become so economically and culturally advanced, and had taken control of most of the world through collective imperial power, that for the first time in world history the Christianization of the world was finally within reach. Because Europe and America, Christendom, were wealthy, healthy, and powerful, the world could know Jesus. The Archbishop of Canterbury opened the conference with a prayer that concluded by asking, "why" the issue of global mission should be only God's, and "not ours also." If only the churches of the enlightened western world could unite around the good news of wealth, health, power, and social advancement, we could be fishers of men.

Four years later these so-called Christian nations in the West began slaughtering one another on the killing fields of France, often with the blessing of the church. These horrible events were only the beginning of the most violent, bloody century in European and World history.

The great error, the great sin, of the Edinburgh Missionary Conference was that they removed their eyes from Jesus Christ, and placed them on a set of their preferred conditions.

They made those conditions their message and their God. The advancement of God's mission that we would be fishers of men is always at every time and in every place in spite of the conditions it faces, never because of them. The hope of the Gospel is not contingent or in any way connected with the economic and political might of any nation, ever in history, but only with the presence of the crucified God with humanity. God with us is our only hope. It should surprise no one that secularism has such a strong grip on the West today, about 100 years after this conference. The end of the century that began with the world missionary conference looks like the opposite of what was predicted there: the poor, supposedly unenlightened colonies are evangelizing their colonizers.

We could call the pride of the Edinburgh Conference laughable, were the toxic combination of nationalism, pride, and a perverted sense of the church's mission not so consequential for the church and the world. It would be easier to laugh about it if it did not still hold a grip on the Western church's thinking. Whether churches are what we would call liberal, conservative, whatever you want to call them, the church in the west still believes the lie that our hope is in wealth, power, health, and safety. We even believe that these conditions are what we are called to bring to the nations.

The fact of the matter is that every day in this world is like the middle of the day on a desert lake, bad conditions for fishing. The conditions for Christian faith are always bad, because of the human condition. There are extremes on many sides. There is Christian suffering, and there is cultural christianity that is anything but Christianity. Just this week in Pakistan, three Anglican clergy were brutally gunned down in the streets of Karachi after a Diocesan meeting, on the one hand. As a Priest in America, I can see how often we struggle to identify where

American custom ends and true Christian faith begins, and I know many in ministry who feel this way, on the other hand. Those are both bad conditions.

We are prone to vilify or romanticize times throughout history and the conditions that came with them, but it is never right to do so as a Christian. We can romanticize the ancient church, the medieval church, the reformation church, or the church of the 1950's for that matter. None are favorable conditions. None are worth returning to. None are worth fighting for.

The medieval English mystic Julian of Norwich said "all shall be well, and all shall be well; and all manner of things shall be well." All shall be well, and not because of what is happening in or around our lives. All shall be well, not because of what is happening, but because of who is with us, whatever is happening.

Jesus says to us, "put out into deep water, and let down your nets." "Because you say so," Lord Jesus Christ, "we will put down our nets." Amen.