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Luke 5.1-11, Epiph 5C

My Story with a Story

I'd like to tell you a bit of my story with this Gospel story today, hoping that somewhere on the way the steps of your journey might fall beside mine – even if we are starting from different places and headed in separate directions.

I've known this story for some time; it occurs in Matthew, Mark and Luke with slight changes to the details. It's one of "those Fishing Stories." I knew it and knew that Jesus was friends with a lot of fishermen, though that was not a way of life or even a hobby with which I was terribly familiar. My grandfather fished, but only recreationally and really perhaps as a generationally appropriate way of seeking counsel from friends. Fishing with a pole on a lake can give you a lot of time to talk. Yet, these fishing stories were about professionals, and with nets.

So, the most recent piece of my story with this story was last fall as part of a group conversation with some clergy at a retreat when the discussion turned to commercial fishing practices. If this seems a strange conversation for clergy on retreat to be discussing, let me set the stage a bit more. We were in the midst of a week-long journey with each other taking a close look at our own personal calls to ministry. Our leader handed out a Xerox copy of this passage, broke us into small groups of three, and asked us to discuss the story of Simon Peter's call by Jesus to leave off fishing for fish and take up fishing for people. The implication was clearly that this was a wonderful story for a bunch of ordained folks, rallying us to our sense of purpose. You might naturally think that this story resonated with us. Yet, one woman in the group who lives on the coast of California and knows a little something about modern commercial fishing began to speak about how much the image of the nets disturbed her. She knew that the large, modern vessels she saw didn't just catch the fish that they would sell, but all kinds of marine life that was generally sacrificed to expediency. If nets caught a lot of fish, they also caught a lot of other creatures. And none of them – fish or otherwise – would survive, much less celebrate being caught up in the nets.

Needless to say, this review of the contemporary imagery put a damper on our conversations. Evangelism or "fishing for people" is tough enough anyway, and if it looks the way we now saw it with those images – it seemed even more complicated, if not cruel. None of us wanted to be called into a vocation where we were implicated in such a business. Thank goodness my story with this story did not end there. But because of this encounter, when I saw some time ago that it would be my lot to tackle this story on a Sunday, I was dismayed. The original Biblical image was no longer inspiring, rather it was tarnished and even ugly. (While, of course, I knew that the properties of scale between multi-nationals and Peter and his friends were quite different.) Still, I persevered reading and talking with others about this story. And I found my way to a man named John Drury who explained that the Greek word for catching (stay with me), the word used for catching is "to denote rescue from peril of death, not the capture of animals – and so it is as inappropriate to fishing as it is appropriate to Christian mission." And the commentary continued, "the kingdom (afterall) requires not dead fish, but human beings fully

alive – not creatures writhing in the last gasps before death, but people living the life of the good news in all its fullness.” (John Drury and Peter Eaton in Feasting on the Word)

“The kingdom requires not dead fish, but human beings fully alive – people living the life of the good news in all its fullness.” Now THIS is a story that I want to be my story. The work of Simon Peter regains its luster and my call and YOUR calling is once again inspiring and engaging. We all of us want to be fully alive, living the life of the good news in all its fullness. We all want to be rescued from the peril of death – literally or metaphorically. And we know people who need to be rescued with this message. This is the message that Simon Peter was given to take, and this is the message that we are meant to share: that in God we find our full life, our full joy.

I tell you this story of my story with this Gospel reading, not (hopefully) to bore you with the details of sermon preparation, but to demonstrate that the stories we read from 2000 or more years ago are worth working at, worth talking about, worth studying, worth examining and reexamining, worth arguing with, worth wrestling with. It can all seem so foreign – another time, another part of the world, different social customs, different livelihoods, different languages even. Yet, for us to live fully the story must live fully. The book is not a dead fish either, worship is not a dead, spirituality is not just letting yourself get caught, passively showing up on a Sunday and then moving on. No, these stories are alive, the good news is full, we are asked to set out into the deep waters and struggle with the catch. You and I ought to ask the hard questions of the text or of our common practices, “what did it mean and what does it mean,” fight with it, explore, and come up more fully alive for the task. “The kingdom requires not dead fish, but human beings fully alive – people living the life of the good news in all its fullness.” To know all the fullness that the good news can bring, we are called to see the good news with our own eyes, to put our brains to work, to listen to our hearts, wondering aloud with friends, and then to come back for more, throwing our nets out again and again – even if like Peter we doubt we’ll come up with anything new this time.

Our responses to the story of Simon Peter and so many other biblical folks are opportunities to dive in deeper to our personal faith stories. Even if our daily work is not the work of fisherfolk, still we know that we are asked to look up from our daily tasks and see Jesus and see God at work inviting us out into the deep waters, sometimes those deep waters are the story themselves, and we sail out with companions seeking a closer knowledge of God. To share the good news of the fullness of life in God: this is, and always has been, and ever will be the mission of the church that was founded when those first guys got out of the boat and followed Christ.