

Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale
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17:55

Collect Call from Jesus
Isaiah 6:1-13
Luke 5:1-11

Have you ever had that embarrassing experience of someone waving at you, and you wave back, only to realize they weren't really waving at you at all, but to someone nearby?

Do you know what? That never happens to me. Nope, it never does. Now this is not because I have some great keen awareness of when I am being summoned. No, rather this never happens to me because I never think that someone is waving at me, that someone is trying to get my attention. I always assume they are looking for someone else.

I never think they are looking or waving at me.

This played out one time at a colleague's ordination. Ruth had been through the ordination ritual and about to begin communion, which is an important, meaningful part because it is the first time a newly minted pastor can preside over communion. Just as she was about to start she looked over and motioned to me.

I was sitting in front row with all the other clergy. She motioned; I sat there smiling back at her. She motioned again. I looked to my left and my right. She stared at me. Finally, I mouthed to her, "me? You want me?" She nodded. And I walked up there. She needed some help with uncovering communion plates or something. I don't remember. I was still a little taken aback. Me? You mean me? Really?

And I can imagine in Ruth's mind it was, "You! Yes, you....! Stop sitting there and get up here and help me....!"

Jesus is walking the shoreline, preaching and teaching. The crowd starts to get overwhelming, pressing on him, so he borrows a boat to use as a pulpit and then, when finished he tells the fishermen, "well, let's go fishing. Out there. In the deep water." And Simon says "yeah, yeah, buddy, who are you? A carpenter moonlighting as a preacher. We fished all night and got nothin'. But what the hey, it's not like we're doing anything else here."

They throw in the nets, they come up bursting with fish, almost to sink the boat, and Peter, well he starts calculating his profit, right? Or no, he thinks about what to put in his IRA, or no, he says, they'll be a big party tonight...

No, Peter's response is quite different. He falls down at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man."

Or translated a different way from the Message Bible, "I'm a sinner and can't handle this holiness. Leave me to myself."

And Jesus replies, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will be catching people."

Isaiah receives much the same message in our Hebrew Bible reading. When God calls him Isaiah protests, "but I am a man of unclean lips."

What do we say when God calls to us?
Poet Thom Shuman writes in his weekly lectionary poem:

Not me . . .

you can't be speaking to me . . .
can you?

after all,
i am a selfish person
in a culture which
worships the self;

i've never felt the brush
of seraphim wings
(though my beloved
did caress my cheek
this morning);

no hot coals
have singed my soul
(yet, there are
the kisses
my children
give me);

and it is easier
to pull in my fears,
clean them up,
and store them away
for tomorrow
than to let them down
into the deep waters
of discipleship
and servanthood.

you can't be calling me . . .

can you? (c) 2007 Thom M. Shuman

Not me?

“You, yes, you,” says Jesus. “You, yes, you,” says God. And all our protests of unworthiness, sinfulness, inability, brokenness, imperfection make no difference to the one who calls us forward into the deep water, who calls us forward into ministry. You, yes, you. I want to send you.

I'll teach you to fish for people. Despite all your protests...

On the one hand we think we are not good enough, skilled enough, perfect enough or whatever enough to serve God, to do good things, to fish for people. We doubt ourselves and in doing so doubt God's ability to work through us. We can't imagine the goodness of God not being spoiled by our hands, our hearts, our flaws, our sins.

On the other hand, we hide behind our imperfections and say, well, I just can't. I just don't have the skills, the ability, the clean soul needed for the work. We are afraid or just disinclined to wade into the deep water. And in doing so thwart the miracles, the work, God could do through us.

But God calls, you, yes you. Jesus calls, you yes you. What do we answer?

God says "you, yes you. I want you. Come, join me. Come bring word to my suffering people Israel. Come, help me fish for people. Yes, you. Help me with the catch. It doesn't matter if you have unclean lips, if you see yourself as sinful, if you don't think you are able or worthy or of any use. I want you, yes, you."

So, what are we waiting for?

I imagine sometimes we are uncomfortable with the "fish for people" the "catching people" metaphor. Does this mean we have to stand on the corner near the State Capitol telling people they must repent? Or going door to door asking if folks have been saved? We see images of people getting "hooked" and "reeled in."

But I wonder if catching people might mean something different. We can think of "catching" people in the sense of being a net, catching them as they fall. On the individual level we catch people, help them to heal, repent, recover, find their bearings, learn about Jesus' teachings and love, know themselves to be beloved of God, reconcile to others' or their past, and more. At our best, in the church we "catch and release" catching folks by welcoming them and strengthening them and partnering with them and watching God work within them sending them forth into ministry maybe with us or maybe elsewhere.

In the more social justice sense we catch people in the advocacy work we do for example in this week of prayer for prisoners, we catch them in our support of prisoner re-entry programs. We catch people in advocating for health care and fairness in our health programs. We work to provide a net. Catching them as they fall. Or before they fall.

Theologian Rev. Svennungsen writes: "The 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." (weekly seeds at iucc.org)

But the only way to do that is to get in the boat and head out to deep water. Few if any water rescues happen in ankle deep water. We like to stand there. The water is warm, the waves are gentle; we don't even have to get that wet. But Jesus asks us to fish for people. In the deep water. And he's not just calling saints. Jesus starts with fishermen, a group of pretty rough around the edges folks, if you know what I mean, and probably a little fragrant too. With a colorful vocabulary and very few "learned" skills. Come, he tells this rough crew. We're going to fish for people.

Melissa Bane Sevier is a pastor and shared this story.

A church I know wanted to fish for people, and they looked around to see where Jesus was inviting them to throw their nets. They saw that a lot of children in the free lunch program at the public schools didn't eat well when school wasn't in session. So the church partnered with a local agency to provide bag lunches five days a week in the summer months. The agency provided much of the funding; the church provided most of the volunteers.

At the beginning, things were fine. A few children came in each day; a couple of volunteers were needed to make sandwiches and assemble the bags. Soon the volume increased.

Siblings who were too young for school also were hungry. Children started taking home bags for the whole family. More volunteers were needed, and more food. The boat was filling up, stretching the resources.

Then the volunteers began to worry about the quality of the lunches. Baloney sandwiches and chips didn't seem good enough, so they started purchasing healthy food on their own, because the agency had limited funds. They added milk and fresh fruit, and more children came with their families in tow.

That was when it broke. The agency pulled the plug on the funding, because other sites around the county couldn't afford the extra items, and the agency didn't believe it was fair for one site to offer more than the others. The little church was devastated by the news. The cost of the program was too much for them to manage without the agency's help.

They felt they'd been unsuccessful, and they went back to cleaning the nets. What was the point, if their programs weren't going to continue.

Over time the church regrouped, faced the reality of the situation and of their own disappointment, and began casting about for where Jesus might be telling them to throw their nets next. Their foray into the area of food ministry emboldened them to try something brand new they'd never heard of. They contacted another agency and the local food pantry.

Together, the three of them began offering a regular program where adult food pantry clients came to the church kitchen, received a bag of groceries and a free gift (measuring cups, for example, or a spatula), and had a cooking and nutrition lesson from a dietician, using the items in the bag. They sat down to a meal together, then took the groceries home to replicate the meal for their families.

This wasn't at all what the church had in mind when they participated in the first food program. Instead of children, they had adults. Instead of summer, it was year-round. Instead of making sandwiches for guests, the guests were learning to cook. Instead of baloney, families were getting healthier foods.

This wasn't at all what they had in mind.

But when you go fishing with Jesus, you never know what you'll catch.

In this moment of interim time Pilgrim folks are wondering what ministries await this congregation. How are we called to fish for people? What people with what needs and where? We know Jesus is calling and we are trying to listen. We who have known success and failure. We who have been broken as a church community and who are healing. We who are of unclean lips.

It is easy, too easy, to think God calls the perfect people, the amazing people to ministry. The Mother Teresas, the Gandhis, the Martin Luther King Jrs. And not us. What could we piddly little folks do, anyway, with our faults, our tempers, our sins, our doubts. How can I be called if I'm not even totally sure what I believe about this God and Jesus stuff anyway?

"Do not be afraid. Come, we'll go and do it together," says Jesus. "Come, I will transform you from a person of unclean lips to a servant who brings good news of God's love and healing. Come, I need you. You, yes you."

As the story goes, a water bearer in India had two large pots, each hung on an end of a pole which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master's house, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For a full two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water in his master's house. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect to the end for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do. After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream.

"I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you."

"Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?"

"I have been able, for these past two years, to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your masters house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don't get full value from your efforts." the pot said.

The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in his compassion he said, "As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path."

Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it some. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again the Pot apologized to the bearer for its failure.

The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of your path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my masters table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house."

God asks, whom shall I send and who will go for us?

Jesus calls, who will come and fish for people?

They are calling you. Yes, you. You of unclean lips. You of sinful pasts. You of doubts and disbelief. You, the cracked pots of this time and place. You Pilgrim church. You in all your uniqueness and imperfection. Jesus calls.

You, yes, you.

Jesus calls. Let's go and help with the catch. Amen.