

The 5th Sunday after Epiphany (C)
February 10, 2019
Text: Luke 5:1-11

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A friend of mine has said that when his mother would call him and his brother to the table for dinner, there were two distinct kinds of calls. The first call was friendly, with a kind of sing-song quality: “Time for dinner! Wash your hands and come to the table!” And usually, he said, that was enough to get them moving. After all, they were growing boys with huge appetites. And sometimes it was almost like a race to the table. But there were other times, maybe they weren’t really paying attention—maybe they’d been paralyzed by the TV or something. But when the second call came, the friendly, sing-song quality was gone. It was a summons: “Come to the table right now. Turn the TV off. It’s time for dinner.” From his mom’s tone, it was absolutely clear that responding immediately was the only real option there was.

I wonder whether our gospel story for this morning sounds to you a little bit like that second call—a clear and unequivocal summons—although it isn’t so much an insistent tone of voice on Jesus’ part. It’s who Jesus has been revealed to be. Simon and the other fishermen had been out all night, when the fishing should be the best, and had caught nothing. They knew their job well enough to know that if the best fishing hours had yielded nothing, then it would only be a waste of time and energy to go out in the middle of the day. So when Jesus told Simon Peter to put out into the deep water and let down the nets, it was probably with a bit of a sigh that Peter said, “If you say so.” And when the nets filled to the breaking point with fish, and he had to call for James and John to come help him, it was absolutely clear to Peter that this wasn’t just a lucky catch. Present in Jesus was power greater than anything Peter had experienced before, power that could only be understood as divine, power that might even be terrifying—and dangerous to be around for anyone as imperfect and as fallible as Peter.

But Jesus spoke to Peter’s fear—Do not be afraid. And then came the summons: “From now on you will be catching people.” And Peter seems to have understood that there was only one real option for responding, and that was to follow Jesus and learn what Jesus wanted from him. And in part, the story that Luke goes on to tell, on through the gospel, and then on through the book of Acts, is about how Peter learned what sort of great work of healing and liberation Jesus was up to, and what part Jesus wanted Peter to play in carrying on that work. Sometimes the learning process was particularly painful for Peter. He learned that what Jesus was up to turned ordinary human values and ordinary human ambitions upside down. Jesus’ work of healing and liberation included things like loving your enemies and forgiving those who hurt you or offended you. It included crossing over social boundaries to welcome “those people,” whoever “those people” might be for you. It meant letting go of every effort to build yourself up and make yourself great, in order to be able to serve and care for neighbors in need. It finally meant that Peter’s life was no longer just about Peter, but he had been called to become an instrument of God’s healing and welcoming and outreaching love.

And today, as we hear about how Peter was summoned to leave behind his fishing nets and boat so that he could learn what it meant to belong to Jesus, to follow Jesus, and to embody Jesus' way compassion and forgiveness—we are also hearing our own calling, our own summons to follow, to be part of Jesus' work. And it seems me that we can discover how to respond to Jesus' call to us in a couple of different ways.

One way that we can respond to Jesus' call is through our day-to-day activities—whether it's in a job that we're paid for, or caring for our home and the people or animals in it. The church word for this way of responding to Jesus' call is “vocation,” and it was one of Martin Luther's revolutionary ideas. In the medieval church, when people talked about being called by God or having a vocation, they meant a religious vocation—being called by God to a religious life as a priest, or a monk or nun. But Luther taught that every person has a calling from God. God calls each of us to go about our work as God's person in the world, and to see our work as a holy task. It doesn't matter whether you are a teacher or police officer, a cook or a parent, a construction worker or an accountant. When you are teaching children, or attending to public safety, or preparing a meal, or building a house, or helping someone file their taxes, you are contributing to the wellbeing of the human family. And as a person of faith, you do that work as an expression of love for God and love for your neighbor. Your job, then, is so more than a way to get a paycheck. It is your vocation, part of your response to Jesus' summons to follow his way of love.

And there's more. We also respond to Jesus' call by living as agents of the reign of God. That means we are working for nothing less that the transformation of this world, so that it comes to reflect God's values—God's compassion for all people, God's forgiveness, so that enemies can become reconciled, so that the human family can be healed and made whole. The world as it is—it's a long way from fully reflecting the reign of God. The pain and the problems in this world run so deep. But every one of us has been gifted by God in some way to bring healing to the human family, to help change the world. There's an intersection somewhere between the gifts you've been given, and the needs and hurts of the world, and what you deeply care about—your passion, your desire to see change in the world. Where those things come together—your gifts and your passion and the world's needs—there's where you can experience Jesus' call to follow him, to share in his work to heal this beloved world. I know some of you are passionate about refugees, and you invest your time and energy into helping refugees find a safe home in a new land. I know some of you care deeply about homelessness, and you've volunteered to serve meals and do child care at the Family Winter Shelter. I know some of you are concerned about hunger, and you've brought food to share and have volunteered at the Food Pantry. In all of these ways, and so many more, you are agents for the reign of God.

It may feel overwhelming sometimes. The problems are so huge. And it can be truly difficult to swim against the stream of both culture and human nature. But our call isn't to change the world all by ourselves. We simply respond in love by doing our part. It may look small, but truly, to hear Jesus' call and to open our hearts to this wounded world is to

receive a great and heroic task. It seems to me that there are a lot of people live with a kind of emptiness, going through life with no clear sense of where they're going or why. There's no greater imperative in their lives than to keep themselves entertained, or distracted at least. What they need is what you have—to be summoned to something great and true, something so much bigger than yourself, to belong to something eternal, something full of life and blessing. That's what Jesus' call is.

And here's the surprise. To be summoned out of our own little lives to be part of something true and beautiful and demanding, to become part of God's work of healing and liberation—it is our own healing and liberation. It's what Simon Peter discovered when he left his nets and his boats, and followed Jesus. And it is what we discover as we set aside the life in which we're the center of everything, and our wants and desires are the center of everything, in order to embrace Jesus' call and follow him—follow his way of compassion, his way of reconciliation, his way of peacemaking and justice—follow him all the way into the reign of God. Thanks be to God. Amen