

Isaiah 6:1-8

Psalm 138

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Luke 5:1-11

Sermon for 2/6/2022

HOW TO CLEAN FISH

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: What we can, when we can, where we can.

The Gospel episode we read this morning is Luke's version of something we also find in a much simpler form in Mark and Matthew's gospel. In those two gospels, we're simply told that Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee one day when he saw some fishermen, the two brothers, Peter and Andrew. In this pared down version, Jesus simply says to them "Follow me, and I'll make you fishers of men," and they thereupon drop everything and become his disciples. And then a little farther down the beach, there are two more brothers, James and John, and Jesus also beckons them to follow him, and they also immediately abandon their family and livelihood to do so.

Luke's version, the one we read this morning, adds quite a bit of detail to this bare-boned account, including what may or may not have been a miracle, but which was in all events a very remarkable occurrence. It all took place, according to Luke, on the morning after the fishermen – the two sets of brothers and perhaps some others – had been out fishing on the lake without catching anything. Jesus commandeers Peter's boat to do some outdoor preaching to the crowd who had come to see him; and when he's finished, he tells Peter to pull out onto the lake and lower his nets one more time. After a putting up a little resistance, Peter complies, and sure enough, this time they haul in a huge bonanza of fish. Whereupon Peter, always excitable, throws himself down at Jesus' feet in the boat and exclaims: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

This extra bit of context helps makes the decisions of the two sets of brothers to follow Jesus as his students more understandable, and that's almost certainly why

Luke adds it to the earlier accounts in Mark and Matthew; although we still have to believe that there was a good deal more background about their prior relationship with Jesus that is left out of all their accounts. From John's gospels, in fact, we learn that all the brothers had been familiar with Jesus for some considerable time before this. In all likelihood, what happened on this particular morning alongside the Lake of Galilee was probably something much more like the tipping point in their relationship with him, a single particular event that stood out in their memory as the moment when their minds were finally made up, when they finally threw in the towel, so to speak, of their resistance to his call.

It's always important to remember when we read the gospel accounts that they were written thirty or four years after the fact, and consist largely of memories of Jesus that really stood out in the memories of the participants. They weren't necessarily trying to teach religious doctrine or offer practical instruction when recounting these events; they were in many cases simply telling us something about themselves and their relationship with the man of whom they later, especially after they witnessed his resurrection, became convinced was God incarnate, the savior of their souls and of the soul of the whole world, and to whom they would then spend the rest of their lives bearing witness.

Let me offer a kind of homely analogy by telling you how I became a diehard Pittsburgh Steeler fan, many many years ago. I was living and teaching as a young man with a young wife in Pittsburgh at the time. My wife happened to be Jewish, and some of our friends were also Jewish. Among those friends was a young couple, who both were quite active in the local Jewish community. He was also an academic, although he taught at a different college from the one where I was teaching; and his wife was what you might call a young Pittsburgh socialite. Anyway, we became fairly good friends and did a lot of things together.

On one occasion, we were invited to a small dinner party at their house, and when we arrived, they introduced us to another young couple who were also friends of theirs, the Grossmans. While we were getting acquainted with small talk, naturally we told each other what we did for a living. I teach philosophy at Carnegie-Mellon, I told the young man somewhat pompously. And what do you do? "I play football for the Steelers," he told me. And that's when I made the connection that I hadn't made when we had first exchanged names. His name was Randy. He was Randy Grossman, the starting tight end for the Pittsburgh Steelers, who had already at that time won a couple of Super Bowls.

Long story short, my wife and I spent some time with the Grossmans on a few other occasions after that, and from that time on, I became a committed and lifelong fan, through good times and bad, of the Steelers.

Now isn't that an interesting story? But are there any lessons to be learned from it by those who hear the story? No. It's just a piece of history about how I became a dedicated fan of a particular football team.

And I think that's the best way to approach many if not most, of the miracle stories we read in the gospels. Jesus Himself on many occasions was at pains to make it clear that his miracles were to be understood as signs. Signs of what? Signs that we can believe him, that we can believe what he taught, that we can believe the information he was providing, perhaps most important of all, that we can put our faith in His promises.

Have you ever noticed when you go to the doctor's office, there are always medical credentials and diplomas prominently displayed on the wall of the waiting room? Why are they there? Because they're signs, signs to us, the patients, that whatever the doctor is going to tell us is true, and that whatever instruction the doctor provides and whatever treatment he or she recommends is something we can be confident in.

It's important to keep that in mind, I think, because failure to do so can often lead us into confusion, or even disappointment about ourselves and even about our faith.

Let's return to our miracle of the unexpected enormous catch of fish. All of the accounts we have of this amazing morning on the shores of Lake Galilee conclude with Jesus telling Peter and the others, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

When you read commentaries on this episode and its concluding words, or when you hear it preached about from the pulpit, it'll often be interpreted as an instruction to us, the readers, to get out and evangelize for Christ, to preach the good news and dedicate ourselves to bringing nonbelievers into the fold.

And then, when we don't do that, when we engage as Christians the way most of us do, by attending church, by engaging in prayer and forgiveness, by simply modeling Jesus in our own small way within our limited circumstances, we may come to regard ourselves as failed Christians in some important respect. We may

come to think that unless we are out actively and energetically fishing for men, we are being disobedient to Christ's explicit instruction.

But what I want say is that that's wrong. That would be like feeling ashamed when we look at the diplomas on the doctor's office that we didn't go to medical school, so that we could prescribe antibiotics for our friends.

On that morning long ago on the shores of Lake Galilee, Jesus was alone in a pagan world, and what he needed there and then was a small group of committed followers who would spread the news about him as far as their legs could carry them, who could speak as eyewitnesses to what they had seen and experienced, to establish a beachhead of enlightenment about Christ in a vast and dark world who knew nothing of this obscure rabbi from a nondescript little town in a backwater country.

We don't live in such a world. We live in Orleans County, where there are lots of Christian churches and where everybody has already at least heard of Jesus. Our assignment will be something quite different from theirs. The miracle for the abundant catch of fish was a sign for them as well as us, but instructional material for them, and not for at least most of us.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, in a passage we read here two weeks ago, Paul was at pains to assure the members of the young church in Corinth that their different roles were all vital to the health of the body of Christ:

12:12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

12:13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

12:14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

12:15 If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body.

12:16 And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body.

12:17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

12:18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

The point is that we must not feel inadequate or ashamed of not following a specific instruction given to a particular group of young men at a particular place on a particular occasion under a particular pressing need two thousand years ago. Our responsibility is to remain alive to Christ's instruction for who we are, and where we are, today.

Let me conclude with a confession. I am not a fisherman. I have caught perhaps a dozen fish in my life, on various occasions. But I do remember once going with my grandfather to a little lake not far from his farm when I was probably seven or eight years old. We were fishing for what he called bullheads, which were a particularly ugly fish, and the fact that they were so ugly may explain in part why the passion for fishing was extinguished for me at an early age.

Anyway, I did catch one, and my grandfather added it to a line of fish he had caught and that he kept in the water until it was time for us to go back to the farmhouse, which was a very, very modest little place out in the middle of Nowhere, North Dakota. Now my grandfather was a very rough and rugged old guy who had homesteaded that little farm way back at the turn of the last century, and had scratched out a very hard life on that unforgiving farm for the many decades since; and so I remember being surprised by something he said when we brought the fish inside and handed them over to my grandmother to prepare for supper. He said words to this effect: I really can't stand cutting open the fish and cleaning out their guts, so we'll let your grandmother take care of that end.

What we forget when we read about the miracle of the abundant fish that day on the shore of Lake Galilee, is that after they had all been hauled ashore, somebody had to take all those fish, somebody had to clean out their guts, somebody had to cook them, and then somebody had to wash the plates afterwards. And unless somebody did all those things, nobody would have eaten that evening.

To a different group, in a different time, Jesus might equally well have said: Follow me, and I'll teach you how to clean fish.

And so our prayer for today, Gracious God, that you enlighten us about what we can realistically do today in service to Your kingdom, that you strengthen and equip us to the individual and unique role you have for us, just as Jesus did for those young fishermen long ago, and we ask this in his name.