Catching People

A Sermon preached at St Brendan Episcopal Parish on the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 9, 2025 by the Rev. Dr. Jenny Reece

Texts: Isaiah 6:1-13 Psalm 138 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 Luke 5:1-11

Prayer:
Merciful God, Look with compassion on us who gather here about your Word, called as we are by the living Word, Jesus Christ. Open our minds to see the miracle of your abundant love even in the toils and trials of every day. Forgive us for all the ways we comply with evil and give in to selfishness and fear. Fill us with mercy so that we may overflow with mercy to others and so catch them in your amazing nets of love, a love which sets us all free. And so may my words and the meditations of all our hearts be blessed by you, our rock and our redeemer.

“Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

I will admit, I have a little trouble with this passage. It’s probably not the story itself that bothers me, but the fact that I have heard it interpreted too many times in a way that depends on a particularly Western evangelical attitude. Stories like this one teach us, so the interpretation goes, a gospel of “personal evangelism”. Preachers who use this personal evangelism approach to Luke’s story of the miraculous catch of fish will often end by exhorting each of their hearers to follow Jesus out into the world of the unsaved, each with their individual fishing pole, and rod by rod, hook by hook, “each one catch one” and drag them into church or into a particular little boat on the great ocean of faith that sees only itself as sailing in the right direction and holding the very truth of God. But I think that’s not quite right. The gospels, like the culture in which they were written, are not infused with the intensely individualistic approach of much of contemporary Western and American culture.

So I will not be sending you out of here today with your own fishing rod and our own bait so that you can go and catch people to come to St. Brendan’s or to the Episcopal fold.

But at the same time, it cannot be denied: the Gospel is certainly personal. As the call of God came in the form of a vision, for instance, to a unique individual, the prophet Isaiah, so the call to each of us comes by name. Mary, Andrew, John, Jenny. The call of Jesus was, as it was to Simon and his brothers and friends, and later to Paul and through them to so many others both Jew and Gentile, a call to a specific person, beloved of God, touched by the Holy Spirit, and brought by Jesus into the arms of everlasting love. It is important to remember we are each unique, each uniquely gifted, each uniquely loved by the One who created us all.

But we were not created for ourselves alone. Our uniqueness means precisely nothing if we do not bring that individuality to share in the common life with all our neighbors, with all humanity, and indeed with all living beings and with all creation. One Good thing the British empire gave to the world, perhaps the only good thing, was the word and the concept of Commonwealth. The Kingdom of heaven is a commonwealth, where each contributes to the whole and the whole lifts up and incorporates the uniqueness of each. There is no true wealth if we cannot find our commonality in purpose or in very being.

The vision of Isaiah was not for him alone. All that glory, that vision of holiness was not just meant to convince Isaiah to be God's ecstatic and enlightened priest or even worshiper, but was meant to be shared. Who will Go for me? I will go, says Isaiah, send me. For the Word of God is for the people. For the people individually, yes, but in both the old and new testaments more so for the people as a whole, as a community, the people who are supposed to be God's people who once said Yes when God said I will be your God, Will you be my people?

I have to pause here and give a shout out to my very first Old Testament teacher in Seminary. I had started my Seminary education in Boston, at the Boston University School of Theology. A place that literally and in so many ways, changed my life. Part of that was this OT 101 professor, whose name was

Dr. Harrell Beck. He was the very picture of an Old Testament Prophet himself, a large, energetic man, with a great bristling grizzled beard who would stride back and forth in front of the class, sharing his vision of the God one discovers in the Hebrew Scriptures. He would declaim, he would shout: I will be your God, Will you be my people? It was grand, and it was more than a little terrifying. But I have never forgotten his lessons about the Hesed of God: the overwhelming love of God—love that combines judgement and infinite mercy—a love that sweeps all before it and will not let us go without an answer. And an answer that is not one just of individuals but of a people.

The message Isaiah is given for the people is not an easy one: Look, he is to say: you have given way, as a people, to what is worst in human nature. You have focused on yourselves and not on God, you have not judged rightly and you have not been merciful, and what you see around you and will see in days to come, are the natural results of your greed, your indifference to suffering and your injustice.

And this is the good news.

When we look at the call to Isaiah alongside the call to those first disciples of Jesus we find a striking similarity: in each of them Isaiah and Simon respond by saying, what, me? A sinner? The glory and the abundance of God is so great it reveals to each of them their own, and their community's, shortcomings, failures, and downright evils.

The personal evangelism approach emphasizes this. And it's not wrong to stress that yes, we are all sinners. We all make compact in little or large ways with the things around us that we know very well are evil and unjust. We have our excuses: we can't fight those in power who are so obviously wrong. We don't want to rock the boat. What can we do? But to focus on the sin, the failures, the ways we fall short of what we can and ought to do, only makes it harder for us to disentangle ourselves from all that. Wallowing in our sinfulness doesn't save us from it. It also may lead us to focus also on the sins of others. But If like Isaiah, and like Peter, we keep our gaze firmly on the glory

and holiness of God's abundance, our own sinfulness, and the sin of the world, becomes very apparent, we have to acknowledge it, to look it in the face. But if we are saying with the Angels, Holy Holy Holy, and if we are keeping our eyes on the nets of abundant love that Jesus shows us, the sin – our own or others' – can no longer control us. We are called to look at Jesus and to follow him, not at Judas, not Pilate, not Saul of Tarsus, but Jesus, Mary, Paul.

And we are called to follow them into community. In our baptism, we are marked with water and with oil and we are called by our individual name, but in that act we show that we are not mere individuals but we have entered into that great cloud of witnesses, the community of all those who have said Yes, in whatever language from whatever path of faith, to the God of Mercy who in mercy created us and calls us to mercy, forever. And the work of evangelism, which indeed is our work, is not an individual thing.As a colleague of mine, Mark Davis, has put it, "imagine evangelism as more of a movement, a group phenomenon, calling a people to turn around and participate in the Reign of God at hand, right where they are". This is our task today.

To preach mercy to those in power, as we have seen so recently one of our own, Bishop Marian Budde courageously do. No matter what political party you support or for whom you voted in the recent elections, surely a Christian cry for mercy is something to honor.

The abundant catch on the sea of Galilee—is it not indeed a netful of love, shining and squirming with mercy? Let the glory of God and God's abundant mercy and love pour into you. Open yourself to it. As you do, two things will be revealed to you: how short we all come of that glory, and at the same time, how by entering the community of those who are called (ekklesia) you can not only leave that sin and darkness and death and unrighteousness behind but do so in the sure hope that it will be defeated by the God of abundant love. Amen.