

## Fishing for Disciples

Luke 5:1-11, Isaiah 6:1-8

Now, that the long liturgical season of football heads for the high, holy day of Super Bowl Sunday, the new liturgical season starts building momentum toward March. One year I had a parenting workshop at the FUMC of Chapel Hill scheduled, and then North Carolina made it to the Elite 8 and that was played at the same time as my seminar. There were over 200 people pre-registered for the workshop. On the day of the game, I mean workshop, 12 people showed up. Being good Methodists, the church paid me for all 200 people. How appropriate it is that as we move toward “March Madness,” we have a story in Luke about filling the nets (Borrowed from Richard B. Hayes, Duke Divinity School, a high, holy place for college basketball).

What’s not to love about a great fishing story? From *Moby Dick* to *A River Runs Through It*, we are a people steeped in fishing tales. Herman Melville’s tales of imminent destruction are powerful lessons for us in our current malaise. In 1860, Melville wrote: “I muse upon my country’s ills – the Tempest bursting from the waste of Time/On the world’s fairest hope linked with man’s foulest crime” (“Misgivings”). He feared “the founders’ dream would flee.” As I muse on our country’s ills, I am less concerned about the disagreements that currently hold us captive and more concerned about our ills. If you pile up all the ills, those that the right can tick off like a grocery list and those the left can enumerate faster than a calculator, you have a garbage heap of bad news begging for a spiritual renewal. At the very moment that the church seems weakest, most vulnerable, nearest to death, the church is more crucial than ever before. The church has to get back to the business of being the church. Let us pause to let a bit of Melville sink into our minds: “Who does not see that the American people are walking over a subterranean fire?”

“Why,” you may ask, “Why are you being so dark preacher?” The darkness is there in the text: “We have worked all night long but have caught nothing.” What a chilling analogy for our current predicament. Be honest. The diminishing returns of the church and of democracy are enough to drive us to despair. We have been preaching the gospel for more than 20 centuries and so few people respond. Perhaps we aren’t desperate enough, hungry enough, or hard up enough to hear the gospel. There’s plenty folk saying, “I don’t see what Jesus can do for us.”

Let’s start on the surface of our gospel fishing tale. It’s a story about filling the nets of a fisherman – every fisherman’s dream. We are trained to roll our eyes when a fisherman tells a tale. We know, with a wink and a nod, that he didn’t catch that many fish and the big one that got away was not that big. How is it that our politics have become one big fish story? It’s just the way it is in the land where truth is stretched so thin as to be unbelievable even in a gospel.

Peter cries, “We’ve fished all night and caught nothing.” The church is fishing “all night” and coming up empty. We are like a basketball team that suddenly can’t hit a shot. In the 1984 Final Four, Kentucky made only 13 out of 53 shots and lost to Georgetown 53 – 40. In the second half, Kentucky hit only 3 of 33 shots, none by a starter. The church is suffering from more than an off night. We have trouble hitting the side of a barn.

Well, in the story Jesus shows up and when Jesus comes, life takes a turn. The previous night's fishing expedition fades into the bright light of God's glory. But don't jump to a sentimental conclusion. This story has hooks in it and you should tread the water lightly.

The fish story turns out to be a story of being called by God. This is Luke explaining how Simon Peter, James, and John left their fishing business and began to follow Jesus. Since we are among those who have been called by God, this story should encourage us, especially if we feel we have labored long and hard with little or no results. This story gives us hope because it promises us an abundant catch if we remain faithful.

The story has an Old Testament call story attached by our lectionary editors. It's the call of Isaiah, and it's a story of judgment, repentance, and healing. But it's hard for us because the way of God is the way of judgment, followed by repentance, and then transformation. In America we don't want anyone telling us what to do and we generally think that judgment and repentance are old-fashioned leftovers from a superstitious age.

That scene of the angel attacking the tongue of Isaiah with a hot coal – not our idea of healing. I think this is a moment of catharsis for Isaiah. I am convinced that the church needs the experience of catharsis. The history of this word is by no means meek. Back in the dark ages of medical processes catharsis included leech-assisted bloodletting and orgiastic music to the mingling of human blood with animal blood. By the way, leeches have made a comeback. “The medicinal use of leeches — scientifically known as hirudotherapy — has grown gradually since gaining FDA approval in 2004. Catharsis is a process of releasing strong, repressed emotions. Sounds like America huh? Catharsis is a “forcing out.” Catharsis is a bodily purge. Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, says, “The soul, like the body, needs an occasional purge. Pent-up emotion is apt to explode inconveniently.” Our culture offers a form of fake catharsis in the form of entertainment to help us release pent-up emotions. But this is not working. We are still bored, anxious, depressed people. Our emotions are getting the best of us – anger, rage, hatred.

Isaiah received a purging from God – a real act of catharsis involving his tongue: “Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’” As Kenneth Burke puts it, “If there is a cleansing there must be persons or things that do the cleansing.” And the “tongue” of America – our degraded, despicable speech – needs purging. Nothing can save us now except the live coal to the tongue administered by the seraph on the hot end of a pair of tongs. I have told you before that as a Louisiana man, I believe that food should involve some pain to the tongue. Well, as it turns out, some pain to the tongue is necessary for us to learn how to once again speak the word of God. Preachers sipping lattes will have no gospel word of judgment and transformation. James 3 tells us that the tongue is dangerous and can't be tamed. “It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

We want nothing to do with tongs and hot coals touching our tongues. Instead, we have pretend moments of cleansing. Burke calls this the “Beauty Clinic.” This is his term for our efforts to clean up and neaten up our ideas and make them presentable. We prefer the “Beauty Clinic” to Isaiah's tongue-burning.

The weak, tepid, compromised, accommodated churches of America try to have the healing power without the judgment. They want the good times, the fun times, the entertaining times, the rah-rah-boom-boom-boom-zoom-zoom-zoom time without what Kenneth Burke called the “gulpo-gaggo-gaspo” symptoms of gulping, gagging, and gasping.

Isaiah and Peter can show us and verbalize for us what an authentic response to God should be. “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” Peter cries, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

Now do we see what this has to do with the fish story? The Lord who called Isaiah is the same Lord who called Peter. Jesus catches Peter, James, and John. It turns out that the fish story is a prop. Peter, James, and John were the intended catch. Jesus nets three disciples. Jesus calls all of us to gather in humankind for judgment and mercy. Jesus recruits us to catch people (Richard B. Hayes, “Netted,” sermon in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, 311 – 316).

The road to encountering God must go through Judgment Avenue and Repentance Boulevard. It’s a rough road and it entails judgment, but it is the only way to arrive at Mercy Avenue. And it’s not a one-time journey.

Can we not now rejoice that our lives are made over again and again and again as we receive the forgiveness of God, as we partake of the bread and the wine? Is this not the journey of faith? May God release us, having been terrorized and transformed by judgment, into the amazing superabundance of his mercy.