

“...And Then What?”

Luke 5.1–11

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 4 February 2007

I was going to jump right into this sermon and talk about evangelism and becoming “fishers of folk” and reaching people with the Good News of the Kingdom of God. That is a critically important aspect of who we are as Christians: *inviting* people to the table and ensuring that everyone is welcome. And I hope you’ll invite people to see if Plymouth is right for them, and I especially hope you’ll make an effort to greet someone here who is *a friend you haven’t yet made*.

The more I thought about it, the more I came around to the idea that we needed to have a conversation about “leaving your nets behind.” You and I may say, “big deal...these guys were in a dead-end job as fishermen.” It’s important, though, to understand that they had a means of providing food for themselves and their families, which was anything but trivial in their Galilean setting. And it was not as if there was a lot of professional or social mobility available to these guys: once they left their nets, they left any semblance of economic security, including basic nutrition.



Let me pose two questions for you to consider about this story: *Is it an allegory about scarcity or a tale of abundance? It is a fable of fear or parable about faith?*

What would you do if Jesus came to you and said, “Leave your cellphone, PDA, and your laptop behind and follow me,” you’d drop everything and become a disciple, right?! Well, you have the significant advantage of knowing a whole lot about Jesus. But if you were a Galilean fisherman with little knowledge of this penniless wisdom teacher, you might be a bit more reluctant. Let me ask you this way: *Are you prepared to give up your career and devote your life to following Christ?* Sit with that question for a bit and wrestle with it.

The idea of renouncing one’s worldly possessions and following a guru is not unheard of. Some people follow Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and others follow Jim Jones and others follow the Rev. Sun Myung Moon. Mostly, we think of those disciples as fanatics who gave up “everything” to become followers.

Don’t you wonder what the families and friends of James, John, and Simon Peter said about them? Can you imagine old Zebedee out there with his fishing boats, and his two sons just take off with this preacher from Nazareth? He must have been incredibly angry and in state of disbelief.

I certainly didn’t “leave it all behind,” though there were some people who thought I was **nuts** to leave a lucrative corporate and marketing communications business to become a minister. Clearly, I am fortunate to have a good income and great benefits and a wonderful congregation to serve, but I did take a significant pay cut to do it. If someone had come to me before I entered divinity school and said, “Leave your business behind, and expect to earn nothing,” I would have laughed at them. So, what I did is *not quite* equivalent to what James, John, and Simon Peter did.

In fact, this story is not about going into ordained ministry as a profession; it’s about something each of us is called to do: *becoming disciples*. You may not have thought very much about the costs of Christian discipleship, because it comes pretty cheap in this country. (Well...at least until we have a capital campaign.)

Last Wednesday, I spent the evening at the Geller Center (as United Campus Ministries is now called) talking about progressive Christianity. (*Nobody told me there was a reporter from the Collegian there, and I had no idea until Jack McGrew emailed me the next*

morning to tell me I was on the front page!) It was a really enjoyable evening with lively debate. As a starting point, I used the Eight Points outlined by the Center for Progressive Christianity. (You can find these on the web at tcp.org or you can see them posted by the front doors in our narthex.) One of the most striking points is number eight, which sounds pretty conventional to me: We “recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails selfless love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.” But to be honest, I think most Christians *stink* at putting point eight into practice, and I count myself among them.

We may think of being Christians as costly, but in our context as the majority culture, it doesn't hold a candle to the cost paid by early Christians, or Christians whose outspoken faith has cost them their lives: people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, or Martin Luther King, Jr. What does **your** faith cost you in time, money, and spiritual energy?

One of the questions I have heard people ask is *If Christianity were a crime would there be enough evidence to convict you?* Chew on that one for a minute...are your finger prints to be found here at Plymouth or at the Mission or at the residence of a home-bound member? Do your political representatives have written evidence of your Christian political ethics? Have you ever been caught in print making a statement about your faith? Does the IRS have evidence that you have given financial support to this or any other Christian organization?

What risks have you endured because of your Christian faith?



We're fast approaching the season of Lent, which for some of us means “renunciation” or giving up something. Some people give us chocolate, others give up alcohol...a few years back I gave up running yellow traffic lights (which still works...most of the time).

When I read Luke's version of this story, I am overwhelmed by the sense of God's abundance illumined in the text. Listen to this part of the gospel again: “he said to Simon, ‘Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.’ Simon answered, ‘Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.’ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.”

The disciples are not only involved in giving something up, but also in placing their trust – their faith – in Jesus. *And they find that putting their trust in him yields a far greater catch than the same old way of life.* Trusting is very difficult to do. *How do you need to trust the Jesus will yield a far greater catch for you when you leave your nets...your baggage...behind?*

James Watson is the new minister at First Congregational UCC in Loveland, is trained as a historian of the Reformation. Here is what he wrote recently about the season we approach:

“Lent began informally in the very early church as a time of preparation for adult converts to Christianity to examine their lives and be sure about the commitment they were to make on the Eve of Easter when they would be baptized, and incorporated into the church. For these folk Lent was a spiritual journey. Members of the church would make this spiritual journey along with these new converts as sponsors, and spend time in reflection about the state of their own spiritual lives.” Spending time in reflection is how I try to observe Lent, and how we're doing it with our new Lenten devotional Blog (which has music, art, poetry, and prose...and your contribution is welcome!).

Eventually, the pre-Reformation church became a bit obsessive with what to give up. The Fishmongers' Guild even convinced the pope to declare certain meatless days during Lent. (No conflict of interest there, I'm sure.) My colleague in Loveland continues: "In 1523, Ulrich Zwingli had enough of what he called the Lenten foolishness. He was the humanist priest at the Grossmünster (Big Church), and had been preaching reform for some time before Luther published his 95 theses six years earlier. But the Bishop of Constance paid little attention to him. On Ash Wednesday of that year, he went to his publisher's house...and sat down with him and some other high profile guests to a sausage dinner. For some reason that got the bishop's attention! And the Reformation was off and running in Zurich."

Last weekend, Sharon and I took the confirmation class to hear Peter Gomes at First Congregational UCC in Boulder. Gomes is the chaplain at Memorial Church at Harvard, and is the only individual I know who is African-American, Republican, gay, American Baptist, at Harvard...all at the same time! Gomes talked about salvation and a famous public figure whose sense that "getting saved" was a one-time experience. In his case, giving up drink. That one experience in the past seems to be the central, ongoing focus of his Christian experience. Giving up alcohol is fine and for some people necessary, but I want to ask...**and then what?** What is next after we renounce the evils of demon rum? It isn't enough just to give up booze or cigarettes or anonymous sex or even chocolate. There has to be a **next step** on the Christian journey.

If renunciation is all there is, we deny the inherent goodness of God's creation. The Christian life is not only about giving things up, it is also about having a deep internal spiritual life and also acting for the kingdom of God here and now. The bread on this table is not just to make you feel good; it is bread for the journey that will take you beyond the doors of this church and back into them next week having done something to make a difference.

Anthony de Mello, the late Indian Jesuit, wrote this dialogue between a disciple and a master:

"What is the highest act a person can perform?"

"Sitting in meditation."

"Wouldn't that lead to inaction?"

"It **is** inaction."

"Is action, then, inferior?"

"Inaction gives life to actions. Without it they are dead."¹



You may be the kind of person who would willingly leave your nets behind and follow Jesus. But leaving the nets is only the first thing. "Inaction gives life to actions."

So, let us sit in meditation in these coming days. May we glory in the abundance of God's world and put our trust in Jesus to fill our nets so fully that we fear nothing.

I'd like to close with a very old Celtic prayer:

"Grant to me, O Trinity of grace,

from whom all life freely flows,

that no tie over-strict,

no tie over-dear

May be between myself

and this world.

As it was,

¹ Anthony de Mello, *One-Minute Wisdom*. (NY: Doublday, 1985), p. 156.

As it is,
As it shall be evermore,
With the ebb,
With the flow,
O Trinity of grace.²
Amen.

² J. Philip Newell, ed., *Celtic Prayers from Iona*. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 69.