

Sunday, February 10, 2019

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON
Go Deep!
Luke 5:1-11

INTRODUCTION:

The great contemporary poet and prophet Maya Angelou once remembered how she lived a life of faith.

“I dared to do anything that was a good thing. I dared to do things distant from what seemed to be in my future. When I was asked to do something good, I often said yes... I'll try, yes, I'll do my best. And part of that is believing, if God loves me, if God made everything from leaves to seals and oak trees, then what is it I *can't* do?”

It has been said that being a “Christian” is always a work in progress, a work that begins by saying “yes” to the reality that all things are possible through God’s creative love!

In today’s story, from the Gospel of Luke, we hear how God’s creative and generous love astounded those who witnessed it. In fact, the men who were with Jesus that day were so overwhelmed with awe, that they immediately left everything behind to follow him as disciples.

We can never know with certainty that this event actually happened or prove exactly how it happened. But if we **can** say “yes!” perhaps we will discover a deeper truth that reveals to us something about the nature of Jesus and the activity of a loving God in our world today.

Hear this reading from the Gospel of Luke chapter 5 verses 1 through 11.

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**SCRIPTURE:**

On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.

Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon,  
*“Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.”*

And Simon answered,  
*“Master, we toiled all night and took nothing!  
But at your word I will let down the nets.”*

And when they had done this, they caught a so many fish that the nets were breaking! They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink!

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying,  
*“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”*

For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.

And Jesus said to Simon,  
*“Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.”*

And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

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The Word of God leading us to be a people of God...

As many of you are aware, we are nearing the final stages of “calling” a settled *Minister of Congregational Life* to join us at TriCon. The search committee is diligently discerning God’s “call” to one single person from two dozen or so applicants. The candidates too, are discerning if God might be “calling” them to TriCon Church. Only one will join us. It sounds kind of like a religious reality game show. “*Coming this April, ‘The Call’, Thursdays at 8pm on TBS. God is watching. Will you?!*”

We use this word “call” a lot around here. We wonder together, what God is “calling” TriCon church to be. It’s one of those words that slides easily into our religious lexicon, like *radical hospitality* or *tradition* or *mission*, but we generally don’t talk like this in our day-to-day life outside the church. Still, over time, we absorb these words and phrases and, with continued use, before long, we simply know what it means, and assume everyone else around us does too. But truthfully, I wonder if many of us ever really give much thought to what the heck we are really talking about! And, while it may be completely true that God has *called* us to be *radically hospitable*, faithful to our *tradition* and true to our *mission*, it’s probably a good idea every once in a while, to re-evaluate the meaning and reassess our words, if they are to truly hold continued significance.

Let’s begin in prayer...

Our creative and loving God, lead us into the deep waters this morning. Astound us with the abundant generosity of your presence among us, with us, and in us as we say “yes” to your call. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our rock and our redeemer. AMEN.

I once made a bio-doc film about Father Theodore Hesburgh who, for thirty-five years, was president of Notre Dame. Along with making the University into the esteemed institution that it is today, he also served on the National Science Board. He was the pivotal ombudsman on the U.S Civil Rights Commission and sat on many powerful non-profit boards such as the Rockefeller Foundation and Vatican missions. Over the span of his life he accepted no less than sixteen presidential appointments to wrestle with the major social issues of the day: civil rights, campus unrest, Third World development. Father Hesburgh was one of the key voices that created the American policy of amnesty for immigrants in the mid 80’s. When I met him, he was frail and in retirement. He freely told me about his exotic travels to all corners of the earth. The man had more adventures and wild stories than you could possibly imagine. Meeting Ted (as he insisted, I call him) somehow healed my misplaced resentment against the Catholicism of my youth and broadened my idea of God’s grace and the sacredness imbedded deep in the Catholic tradition. No doubt, the man was brilliant, but beyond that he was

incredibly ordinary, light hearted and unpretentious. It was like talking to your great uncle Ted, who everyone loves.

In one of our dinner conversations I eagerly asked him how all these amazing things happened to him. I yearned to know the great secret to becoming great while still holding fast to the integrity of an uncompromising faith. What was his intention starting out and what strategies did he employ that led him to emerge as a leading voice for the poor and oppressed? What practices and techniques did he use in the halls of power to influence massive justice reforms that would help reshape our nation and transform the world? Ted was entertained by my question. He took a long sip of his nightly ritualistic, single-malt scotch. Finally he leaned in close and said, “Bob, I am simply an ordained priest, called by God for the single purpose of saying the Holy Eucharist. Every day, without fail, no matter what is happening or where I am, or what I am doing, I am called and compelled to say the mass. *Everything* else just spills out from there. I have no other motivation or ambition other than that. I just show up to say the mass.”

Simon also showed up that morning when Jesus walked onto the fish pier on the lake. A huge crowd was pressing in on Jesus, excited to hear his words of promise, liberation and jubilee. No doubt Simon recognized Jesus when he hopped in the boat, because just a few pages back in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus had stayed at Simon’s house and even healed his mother-in-law of a high fever.¹ So I’m sure that Simon was more than happy to stick around the dock and help out his new friend. Although, when Jesus asks him to, “Put out into the deep and throw out the nets.” I imagine Simon was quite hesitant. He’d been out fishing all night long with nothing to show for it. He knew these waters better than anyone, they already tried that and nothing came of it. Still, with doubt and reluctance he showed up when he heard the call and put out into the deep.

I have noticed in Scripture and certainly in my own life that God’s call to us typically begins with self-doubt and reluctance. Last week we heard how young Jeramiah was reluctant because of his youth and poor speech. When Isaiah is first confronted with the divine glory of God, he knew for sure that he was unworthy, unclean and unfit for the job. And here, when Simon comes face to face with God in the flesh, he too falls a Jesus’ feet. “You’ve got the wrong man” he says, “I’m full of sin, you want anyone else but me.” In hearing my call to seminary at 50 years old I too was like Isaiah, “Woe is me! I’m lost!”² I could only imagine impending failure, debt and embarrassment.

¹ Luke 4:38-39

² Isa 6:5

Today I believe that every single one of us is *called* in some way by God. Your divine *calling* is what defines and orders your distinctive and essential purpose in the world. It's that sweet place where the unique gifts, skills and abilities that you never truly believed you had, intersect with the needs of your community. What holds us back from following the call is almost always feeling inadequate to the call and the fear of uncertain change. We are all unworthy of God's personal call. It's ridiculous! God's call is for other people, those special brave souls who are more self-less and saintly than me. A divine calling is for people who are more religiously oriented and spiritually disciplined than I'll ever be - or even **want** to be.

The truth is that everyone has a *call*, a place, a purpose and significance that is particularly and exclusively only yours to fulfill. This idea that God only want's holy and perfect people is what undermines our ability to recognize and accept our true purpose. What scripture teaches us is that God consistently calls ordinary, malformed, incompetent, bumbling, everyday people, like you and me and Father Hesburgh. We are to simply show up and do the next right thing! *Everything* else just pours out from there.

In a few minutes, Moderator Russell Sanna will call to order the 192nd annual meeting of Trinitarian Congregational Church. It is here that we remember how God has brought us through our past and discern where God is now "*calling*" us. At annual meeting we chart the course ahead and agree to move forward together.

I believe God is asking us, as he did Simon, to put out into the deep. I believe God wants TriCon Church to leave the secure safety of the harbor and dive deep into the murky waters of uncertainty. To question what we **think** we already know. If we do, we will certainly risk failure and come up against our shortcomings. There are unknown obstacles down there and we may have to change course a few times. But stick around, because grace will always come to see us through. If we together have the courage to take that plunge into the deep, faith will be our only guide, we will no longer live in the illusion that we are actually in control. It will be only God, the God who overcomes our fears, shatters our inadequacies and redeems our self-doubt. In fact, we will have **no** doubt that it is only our creative and loving God that is able to lift us up to be a unified beacon of promise and hope, a wide open sanctuary of peace and restoration to this troubled, anxious and divided world.

TriCon Church, this may very well be God's call to us today. Are we ready to go deep? All it takes is to leave everything behind like Simon did and follow him.

You go first! ☺