

Nothing Fishy Happening Here!

[Text - Luke 5:1-11]

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This morning's New Testament reading raises the topic of *evangelism*. When I say the word, *evangelism*, I realize it brings-up different images for different people. For some, *evangelism* elicits a good and positive image - of people sharing their faith in a caring and life-affirming way. For others, the word *evangelism* can raise a negative, even *annoying* image - of strange people knocking on your door, questioning whether you will Fly-up-to-Heaven or Fry-down-in-Hell. It's unfortunate, but some Christians do approach *evangelism* as if it were some kind of numbers game. They think they can condense the entire Christian message into a simple four-step formula, which they can quickly present to a large number of individuals; and then feel good about having done their job. Whether those poor souls end-up being "redeemed" or "roasted" really doesn't matter; because those rapid-fire "evangelists" have warned them, and have already moved-on to their next unsuspecting targets.

Even though the word *evangelism* can elicit both good, and bad reactions, at its root this word literally has a *good* meaning. It comes from the Greek word *euaggelion*, which means "Good News". To evangelize, therefore, means to bring "Good News" to others - though one might not know it from the methods and messages many so-called evangelicals present. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean that you and I should abandon the word, or the work of evangelism, to those who do it poorly.

This past week, as I read various commentaries on our passage from *Luke*, I was disappointed by the number of them that made *evangelism* sound like a "round-em up, haul-em in" numbers game. This may be because this passage does reference the tremendous number of fish hauled-in by the fishermen. Yet though this huge catch of fish may point to the tremendous number of people who can be drawn into the Divine Realm, it must not distract us from the essential point of this remarkable story. For while this passage concludes with Jesus telling Simon and his friends that they will soon be catching people, the key element of this story is about how Jesus captures the hearts and loyalty of these fishermen themselves.

As the story begins, Simon and his fishing partners are tired and discouraged. They had fished all night and caught nothing. And now as they dutifully clean their nets, here comes Jesus - surrounded by a large crowd. And he steps into one of their boats and asks Simon to "put-out a bit" from the shore, so that he can better address the crowd. I imagine that Simon and his friends were a bit "put-out" by Jesus' request! Here they are: tired and disappointed, wearily washing their nets, ready to just go home after a night of catching nothing; and suddenly *they're* caught, between Jesus and this surging crowd. I can imagine Simon thinking, "Come on, preacher, hurry it up so we can get out of here!" [Yeah, just like some of *you* might be thinking right now!]

But here's the thing: as these fishermen quietly tend to their nets, they can't help but hear Jesus tend to *his* business: of proclaiming the wonderful, *Good News* of the Holy One's remarkable love. No doubt they'd heard many preachers carry-on about a Stern and Judgmental God, zealously waiting to whack us all; but this guy is talking about a Kind and Compassionate Creator, eagerly waiting to *welcome* us all. They had been taught that God is a distant and demanding deity, who can only be approached with fear and trepidation by a select, holy few; but this guy's talking about a loving and caring Heavenly Parent, who warmly embraces children of all ages and backgrounds, cultures and social standings. You can almost picture those

fishermen gradually forgetting about their nets, and focusing-in on what this extraordinary teacher has to say. And before you know it, they themselves are hooked!

As soon as Jesus finishes instructing and encouraging the crowd, he then turns his attention to those tired yet curious fishermen. He invites them to “put out into the deep waters and let down their nets for a catch.” Simon replies, that though they had worked all night and caught nothing, they would do as Jesus requests.

The result of their following Jesus’ instruction both amazes and alarms Simon and his friends. They bring in a catch the likes of which they have never seen. And suddenly they realize that this Jesus not only *talks* about the tremendous abundance and power of the Holy One, but that he also somehow embodies that abundance and power. Simon’s natural response to this, is to be afraid. This revelation of Jesus’ Divine fullness causes Simon to recognize his own human weakness. So he falls to his knees and says, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” But Jesus doesn’t go away. He looks at Simon and says to him, “Do not be afraid; for from now on you will be catching people!” Then they bring their boats to shore, leave everything, and follow Jesus.”

What transforms Simon Peter from a frightened fisherman into a faithful follower, is a gracious, Divine encounter. When Jesus looks at Simon, he doesn’t see a sinful man. He sees a beloved child of the Holy One. And by treating Simon as such, by inviting Simon and his friends to start *living* as such, Jesus opens to them a whole new [and Holy new] way of life.

Now that’s genuine evangelism! Meeting people where they are - perhaps tired and discouraged, maybe just going through the grind of their daily routine. And reminding them of who they *truly* are! Seeing people through the eyes of Divine compassion and grace. Treating them with respect, patience, and kindness. Showing them that Divine love is for all of us, and that each of us truly matters. That is evangelism in its best and purest form.

Which brings us back to the reason we *do* evangelism. If we do it because we think we *have* to, or simply because of the numbers - because we think it would be nice to have more people in the pews - then we’re missing the point. The true motivation for true evangelism comes from the remarkable realization, that you and I are completely loved by our Divine Source, and that there is plenty of that Divine Love for everyone. And the more inspiration and joy and enthusiasm that we experience in this community of faith, the more we will want to share that experience with others. All we have to do, is simply invite them to come and see; come and experience it for themselves.

You and I do have tremendously *Good* News to share! And it is *in* our sharing and our caring, that this Good News deepens and takes hold of us, and others. For when you and I truly allow Divine love to take hold of us - to live in us and through us - then others will see it and will probably want to know more about it. In other words, they, too, may soon be hooked!