

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Trinity, July 16, 2006

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Our gospel today (Luke 5:1f.) can be read as a meditation on futility. “Master, we have toiled all the night and have taken nothing.” This connects with our first lesson from today’s Morning Prayer in which the preacher observes, “Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done And on the labor in which I had toiled; And indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 2:11). These passages call to mind the seasons of life when we worked hard but were left with a sense of emptiness.

In the gospel, the answer to the fishermen’s futility was found in a faithful and obedient response to God’s word. “Nevertheless, at thy word I will let down the net.” Just so, when we hear God’s word and respond with faith, our own sense of futility is replaced with a sense of meaning and purpose. Our lives become fruitful.

The miraculous catch does not merely represent economic gain. The point of the miracle was not its impact on Peter’s business—which he promptly abandoned. A fruitful life is one in which we know we are doing God’s will and know God’s work is being done in us. Prosperity apart from the service of God will leave us unsatisfied. And we can find fulfillment in times of struggle if we know God is with us; if we can see the growth in virtue and holiness that God is causing in us; if we can see the positive impact we are having on the lives of other people.

Now, in the gospel today, Jesus gave Peter a direct, verbal command. In our lives, the movement from futility to fruitful labor is not always so simple. We can’t always hear the voice of Jesus so clearly. So we must pray and listen for that voice. We must seek, hoping to find, and knock, hoping that the door will be opened.

We begin with the Scriptures. We read the Bible not in an attempt to find magical verses that will provide simple answers. We read the Bible to learn the larger, recurring themes of God’s dealings with man so as to discern the same themes in our lives. We read the Scriptures so that our lives are formed by the biblical story and not the story told in the media—for they are not the same story.

For example, a recurring biblical theme is that God calls his people to do things that require great faith and great obedience. God called Noah to build an ark— a huge project—when there was no visible evidence of any impending flood. God called Moses to take on Pharaoh—one the world’s most powerful rulers at the time—believing that God would somehow use him to save Israel. Jesus was called to be obedient unto death, trusting the Father would raise him from the dead. Jesus called Peter to fish in improbable circumstances.

Thus, if we think God is calling us to do something that requires a great step of faith and obedience, we should take it very seriously. And we should beware of voices that call us to play it safe or take the easy route.

Reading the Scriptures as a habit of life teaches us to recognize the voice of God in contrast with the voice of Satan, the impulses of the flesh and the lures of the world. God does speak to us in ways that are clear. But his voice competes with these other voices. As we read, mark, learn and inwardly

digest the Scriptures as a habit of life, we learn to discern the difference. Like a child who knows which messages are consistent with the character of his earthly father, so we learn to discern the heavenly Father's voice in contrast with the voices of our enemies.

Some regular practice of prayerful silence is helpful in learning to hear God's voice. The busy-ness and noise of the world can drown out the voice of God. Thus, it is necessary at times to withdraw from the cell phone, the computer, the TV and radio, the mp 3 player and the continual urgencies of life that demand our attention so that we can better listen for the voice of God.

We must also listen to the voices of other, faithful Christian people—Christians who are not afraid to tell us we are wrong. For the church is the body of Christ. And Christ will most often speak to us through one of his bodily members. We are often so wrapped up in the details of our struggle that we cannot see what is obvious to another believer. Many Christians head off on the wrong path merely for failure to get a second opinion.

And we must pay attention to how God speaks through the events and circumstances of our lives. If we believe that God is Almighty, then we must believe that God can speak to us through the story line of our lives. We can, by faith, discern the meaning of coincidences and propitious events.

We can see from this brief consideration that hearing God's voice is not a simple thing—not always so clear as the simple command of Jesus to Peter. This is part of the test of faith. Are we willing to seek until we find? Are we willing to knock until the door is opened?

If we stop trying to discern and follow God's word and will for our lives, we will be left laboring with our own unaided human effort. We will, inevitably, be left with a sense of emptiness, of toiling all the night but gaining nothing.

As Hebrews says, "Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6).