



Raphael, *The Draught of Fishes* (c.1513-1514)

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany (C)

February 7, 2010

Luke 5:1-11

The Rev. Dr. Christian Brocato

+May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and Redeemer. Amen.

In the great African American tradition of Gospel music, we know that those who toiled in the cotton fields of the plantations of the south sang. They sang not because they were happy but because it enabled them to be connected to one another as well as connected with God. Having grown up in the South and old enough to have memories of seeing people in the cotton fields of plantations in the blazing hot heat of summer, it amazes me to think that people even had the energy to sing.

One of the African American musical traditions that has come down to us is “Call and Response.” One person calls out by singing a line of music and others respond in response to that call.

It was and is a simple genre and intended to be simple. It was a way of singing, staying in touch, keeping connected hour after hour of back breaking labor, of bending and stooping down, to pull out bowls of cotton from a thick, sharp-pronged, hardened shell. Where do we suppose they got the inner strength to keep going? Where do we suppose they found the energy and zeal to sing even when life was miserably hard and extremely difficult?

The fishermen in today’s Gospel passage from Luke lived lives that were hard, perhaps miserably hard and perhaps extremely difficult. They fished at night. The fish were clever enough to be able to see the nets cast into the lake of Gennesaret which was the Sea of Galilee. During the day, the material from which the nets were made was quite visible, so they fished at night. Who knows but that they may have had day jobs as well as families for whom to tend and care.

The life of those who fish for a living isn’t an easy life; we all know that. Where do we suppose they get the inner strength to keep going? Where do we suppose they find the energy and zeal to respond to a life that is hard and difficult?

Isaiah must have had energy and zeal following the great epiphany he had in the Temple. When he heard the voice of God say, “Whom shall I send,” Isaiah’s response was, “Here am I: send me!” But before he made that response, he said, “Woe is me; I am lost,” a statement of great humility before God.

In Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians, Paul has already experienced the call to discipleship and already responded. However, he is very clear that he is the “least of the Apostles,” an expression of deep humility.

Jesus called the first disciples to himself through the great miracle of catching fish. Peter, James and John responded by leaving everything, even perhaps the greatest catch of their lives, to follow Jesus. In all humility, Peter’s response was “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

In all three of these accounts, the call of God was real and the responses required great strength. Where did they find the energy and zeal to let go of what they knew to embrace a life of the unknown, a life that was not easy, a life that for all but one of the Apostles ended in death, the ultimate sacrifice of discipleship?

As I studied and prayed this past week with these passages, the aspect of 'call' was almost too easy. What finally came to me was that 'call' is certainly a very real and treasured thing for us in the Christian Tradition, but how can we find the strength, energy and zeal to respond with the "yes" that is needed? When God calls us to God's self, when God calls us out of our comfort zones to follow, when God shakes up our lives with stirrings of the Holy Spirit, what do we need to respond?

I believe we need humility of mind and heart. I believe that we need a disposition to change and transformation, interior solitude, perhaps, but also an ardent yearning for more in life. In Frederick Buechner's book, *Wishful Thinking*, he tells us: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet!" (Harper and Row, 1997, pp. 118-119)

My own journey of response to God's call to discipleship has been one that I can truthfully say was routed in my childhood. But, I like so many of us have had to make our way through the thick and thin of life and church to discern just what an 'authentic call' to discipleship means. "It comes through the intersection of a deep awareness of that human need to which one profoundly responds...[It comes from] an overwhelming sense of one's relationship with God" and one's response to God's question: "Whom shall I send, and who will go?" (www.partnersinurbantransformation.org/epiphany5c.htm)

What does it mean to leave one's comfort zone to follow, to embrace an authenticity before God, to be humble before God, to acknowledge that God could be calling us to something deeper, more profound, more life-changing, and more transformative?

Have you ever had to make a decision about your relationship with God, a decision that came from your profound awareness of need for God and a response to it? Have you had to grapple with how to respond to God's presence as you have experienced it deep within yourself? Clearly, more and more of our sisters and brothers are caught up in the jungle of life to the extent that a place for God is less and less important in their lives.

You and I are here today because we believe that God's call to discipleship is real. We believe that our response to that call has us here and not at home or at Starbuck's reading the New York Times or the Boston Globe. Our response to the Word we hear and the Eucharist we share can and perhaps should shake up our lives.

We are challenged yet can stand tall because *we* have "decided to follow Jesus." The ups and downs of our lives, the sadness and fears that we experience, the pain and suffering of illness, loss of loved ones, ends of relationships, unemployment and underemployed...none of these things can keep us from the profound love of God that holds us no matter what happens to us in life. That love embraced Isaiah. It embraced Peter, James, John and Paul. It is a love that embraces us, a love that we can deny but we cannot escape.

God's love is freely and generously given. It united the slaves in the cotton fields of the south and our sisters and brothers trapped in rubble and sadness in Haiti. It is a bond that unites us to God and to one another.

Our profound awareness of the needs of others and our authentic response are borne out of our deep connectedness with God's powerful love, a love that we experience in our personal lives and in the community of faith we call 'Church.' We come in response to that love, and we go in response to love others in return. Amen!