

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Luke 5:1-11

Isaiah 6:1-8

Psalm 138

I Corinthians 15:1-11

February

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

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This week I found myself sitting in a small chapel in Aiken, SC. The chapel was built in the 1840's. Much like Grace Church, it has the felt presence of the generations that have come through its doors to listen for the Word of God. People looking for hope, for guidance, for that still, small voice that makes our souls sing.

This little chapel was such a holy place. And as I sat there, I imagined all those generations who have sat on those very same pews. Generations who have struggled and rejoiced. Who have cried and laughed. Generations who have come to that chapel and knelt on the same ground and prayed the same prayers. Generations who have listened for God.

Of course, it would be easy to fall into a sense of nostalgia about a better time, a better place...and say back in those days people were more faithful. Back in those days, people put God at the center of their lives. Back in those days.

Well, I really don't know about "those days." I suspect that there have always been people of strong faith and plenty of others who struggled with faith. I also suspect that it's very easy for us to reflect on the times we felt were particularly God-filled especially when those times fit into our way of thinking.

It is that sense of nostalgia that caught my attention this week. The funny thing about nostalgia, about a time long gone, a better place, a better day is that it can give us an easy out. It can give us an easy out to not work harder on who we are today. As though our better days are behind us. As though God isn't just as present today, in the craziness of the world we live in, as God was back then...in those days.

I know it may feel as though we are living in such unstable times. Many of us are discouraged and disillusioned. We may find ourselves asking where is God in the midst of it all? We may say things like...I remember when people went to church more, or I remember when faith really mattered. In full disclosure, I have fallen into that trap but recently, I have started to realize that in doing so, by judging the quality of faith in the world today, I am also judging others. I am judging what is going on in their hearts. And, I am forgetting that God is so much more powerful than my opinions.

So, this morning, I want us to put away the nostalgia. I want us to put away the judgement. Because there is no "back then" or "those days" that will make a difference today. The difference can only be found within our own hearts...right now.

All that to say, it made me wonder...how can we cultivate our hearts in this present moment to hear the Word of God? And, how can we open our souls to be willing to trust what we hear?

To consider these questions, let's look at our Gospel narrative this morning. When the story begins, Simon Peter is coming home after a long day fishing with nothing to show for his hard work. He is tired. And while he is cleaning his nets, Jesus gets into one of the boats. He asks Simon Peter to take him out to deep water and then he tells Simon Peter to put his nets back out.

I doubt this was a welcome request at this point in the day. And so, Simon Peter begins to argue with Jesus that he had already been out all night with no luck. Why should he try something new? Why should he do more work? But for some reason he gives in and does what Jesus requests. Simon Peter begins to trust that maybe, just maybe there is something to this thing that Jesus wants him to do even though it's not how he has done it in the past.

So, he throws out the nets and watches them descend into the water. We know the rest of the story. He hauls in so many fish that the nets begin to break. So overcome with the goodness of Jesus' love for him, this sinful man, Peter gives up everything and follows Jesus. He does so without care for what has been or what others have done. He is willing to start something new.

What would have happened that day if Simon Peter had doubted God's voice? What if he had said, Jesus, we have never done it that way before? Or, back in those days, we wouldn't have gone into such deep water. Surely, he could have come up with all kinds of excuses and reasons to not do what was asked of him. Changing course can be downright terrifying, especially if everyone who has come before you has done it differently.

But, that's not the story. Not only does Peter listen and follow Jesus' direction, he goes out into deep and treacherous water. Not just doing something uncertain, but going somewhere uncertain. Not saying this isn't how it's always been done but being willing to try something new. Not looking back on the way things were but looking at how things could be.

So, the big question...why *does* Peter follow? I believe the answer is found in a simple prayer I said in that little chapel in Aiken. I prayed the simplest prayer I could think of...I simply said, "God, what do you need me to know?" God's answer..."*You are loved.*"

That was it. It wasn't some big epiphany of a new life direction. It wasn't some grandiose charge to shake up things back here in Goochland. It was just a simple reassurance. *You are loved.* That was the message. That was the still small voice and that's all I heard.

How does that fit into Peter's story? Let me suggest this...to do what was required of him, to follow Christ into that deep water and then to give up everything he knew required one thing...to believe he was loved. To know in his heart that Jesus loved him so much that he could trust what Jesus asked of him. Peter, you are loved. And he felt it.

Because when love is present, so is trust. When we know we are loved, we can do more than we ever imagined. Love lifts us up and gives us courage and confidence. It gives us the ability to take responsibility for our actions and work for God's creation. Love brings forth a response. Not a lack of response based on what once was but a conviction on what could be.

This is the central teaching of our faith...that God so loved the world that he gave us his son. God so loves us. It is from there that everything else flows and comes into being. And the Good News is that God's love wasn't just given back in the day...it is given to us today. Right where we are.

What would it mean if we believed that truth? What would it mean if we followed that truth? Could we be like Peter and do something new? Could we take the risk and go into deep waters and do the difficult work that is required of us to heal the brokenness of our world? Yes, you are loved. Now let that love bring forth faithful action that can only emerge with God at the heart of who we are.

Thanks be to God. Amen.