

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Sep 5th 2013

Today's gospel from Luke gives us the nice story of how Jesus called Simon and others to be his disciples. The fourth chapter of Matthew and the first chapter of Mark tell about how he saw Simon and his brother Andrew fishing and said "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." ("fishers for men" is another well-known translation.) But in Luke's longer version, before Jesus says, "From now on you will be catching men" (or "people"), he first teaches Simon and his partners a course with both lecture and laboratory sessions.

First, Jesus the Teacher teaches the crowd on the lakeshore and the fishermen in the boat. He doesn't need written notes or a chalkboard, and certainly uses no PowerPoint slides, but don't we all wish somebody's class notes could have survived? Then the demonstration: he instructs the fishermen to move to deeper water and to put out their nets. The fishermen (students) understand what the exercise signifies; they are astonished "at the catch of fish they had made". Simon (later called Peter) gets an A plus or top marks for his understanding as he kneels, calls Jesus "Lord," and confesses himself unworthy. And then Jesus changes their lives forever; "They left everything and followed him."

With my love of deep water (the Atlantic, the truly great Lake Michigan, etc.), I love the images here of Jesus standing by the lake, teaching from a boat, and providing an incredibly large catch of fish.

Beyond images, we can see that this story is about "vocation". Today we celebrate our own calling to life in Christ as we hear how Jesus called the fishermen to discipleship, and how they immediately accepted his invitation. The first reading rejoices in the "spiritual wisdom and understanding" that Paul's students are acquiring, "growing in the knowledge of God" and becoming "fit to share..." in salvation. Then the Psalm sings that "The Lord has made known his salvation. "

This Gospel reminds me of the "aha moment" when I first heard my own vocation. In 8th grade math class, the teacher called on me to explain something. After I gave the answer, she said, "Exactly right. You should be a teacher." And so I thought, "Yes, I want to be a teacher." By the 10th grade I knew that I loved words best and thought "I want to be an English teacher." Aha. Perhaps my alleged career was merely a stubborn refusal to reconsider a hasty decision – but over the years "teaching" felt and still feels like my true calling, by now adapted into different activities with the same goals.

Some of our students may be discovering their vocation this week, even this early in the academic year. Something in a course – in anthropology, in philosophy, in any subject taught here – maybe even literature! – may open the "Aha" moment, the sudden realization: "This is what I want to major in," or "This is what I want to do with my life." It may take many moments, but our students do compile their experiences, both in courses and outside them, and find -- not merely their careers -- but also their values, their vocations, their paths to purposeful lives well lived.

For myself, I don't think I was ever called to leave "everything" as Simon was. Yet fishing for fish is good too; most of the men on that lakeshore stayed home and continued to make their living by supplying fish to feed their local community. While Simon and a few others have an extraordinary calling, this Gospel also reminds us that Jesus calls to new life all who see and hear him in Scripture, in tradition, and in our daily lives. Today and each day, surrounded by the boats and nets of my very ordinary life, I want to hear the call to follow Jesus in the ways he opens to me.

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