

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for February 7, 2010
Lessons: Isaiah 6:1-8 and Luke 5:1-11

IMPACT

I doubt going into the Temple to pray was any less routine for Isaiah than was fishing for Simon and his companions. I picture Isaiah having a normal day and Simon a frustrating, sub-normal night of really poor fishing. “Sir,” Simon says to Jesus, “we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. ” We all know that feeling of frustration in our own lives, whether it comes from working but getting nowhere, looking in vain for employment in an economy still hemorrhaging jobs, or struggling through routine tasks formerly accomplished with ease but now made difficult by aging or illness. And, despite having caught nothing, Simon and his companions still have to wash the gunk out their nets. In both stories, the routine is interrupted and the course of life changed permanently. Both are *call stories*. God calls ordinary human beings to service that will transform their lives and their very souls – their deepest, truest selves.

As Protestant Christians, we believe that each of us has a *vocation* (a “calling”) to serve Jesus Christ, and that calling is not just a single task to complete or a term to serve but a new way of life in relation to God now reoriented by Christ toward other people. Simon will no longer find his frustration or his satisfaction from seeking fish; Jesus is redirecting his concern and effort toward people alienated from God, many outcast from the human community. Each of us is called to ministry and service, not as professional religious employment but as life turned outward toward people in a way that represents Jesus Christ to them as he has come to us.

The church is a servant. The church is not an end in itself. The goal of Christ is a whole world redeemed and healed, but as soon as we hear that great goal, we naturally think of a big program to accomplish such a huge undertaking. Millions will have to be mobilized. We’ll need big givers and powerful movers and shakers to get the job done. To make an omelet that big, a lot of eggs will have to be cracked. But, no. God works in small, mysterious ways, and with God, no person is expendable. Jesus came as the Servant of whom the prophet declared, “A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not snuff out.” The Talmud reminds us, whenever we start thinking in our business and political ways of the grand scheme in which an individual scarcely matters, “Whoever destroys a single life is as guilty as though he had destroyed the entire world; and whoever rescues a single life earns as much merit as though he had rescued the entire world.”

Jesus Christ is never outcome-based in his call to discipleship and service; for him and so also for his church, the end can never justify any means that might promise its attainment. With Jesus, motive and attitude matter as much as and more than the deed itself of worship, service, or faith. If ministry is self-congratulating, condescending, or know-it-all, then it is not ministry but something else. Neither Isaiah's call nor Simon's was an honor bestowed upon the man by a grateful God. But for me, Simon Peter, especially, makes a helpful model for discipleship because Simon is so very human. His personality reminds me of an over-eager St. Bernard dog that bounds into the room to greet you and knocks over a lamp in the process. I'm sure it is because Simon is stumbling and impulsive, then deeply and bitterly sorry for his failures, that I find him so helpful and encouraging. He personifies our need for God's grace and represents for me our great hope for "making it" in spite of ourselves.

Isaiah and Simon Peter are both shocked by finding themselves suddenly confronted by God – Isaiah in his vision's representation of God and Simon in the living representation of God in Jesus. The impact is much the same for both. Isaiah moans in lament, "Woe is me! I am lost . . ." and Simon tells Jesus, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" The feelings are well known to us. Each man is suddenly ashamed of himself – of his very self – and each is afraid. To be human without our many veils and masks of pretense is to be revealed to eyes that cannot be fooled. The man is still clothed, but the soul is naked. Psychologically, when shame and fear come together, they foster guilt, and there we have the big three of the religious life: shame, fear, and guilt. Many people in our society and around the world would agree that the urge to be religious comes from those three negative feelings, and far too often religion in general and Christianity in particular have played upon them to gather and control devoted followers. Keep them at a disadvantage – needy, fearful, guilt-ridden, ashamed of themselves and their lives – and you'll keep them coming back. No, that is not God's way. With a simple symbolic act of purification, God puts Isaiah's shame behind him and equips him to speak God's word to the people. Jesus answers Simon's protest with the call itself. He will not go away and leave Simon alone. The fisherman will become Jesus' student and friend, and the big three – shame, fear, and guilt – are not allowed to stand in the way.

Newly elected or re-elected church officers, I do not wish to make too much of this day in your lives, but neither do I wish to make too little of it, especially not for the two people to be ordained, but not for any. The church cannot manufacture encounters with God by scheduling a ritual, but ordination can become a symbolic focal point for your call from Jesus Christ to follow him, learn life and service from him, and represent his redemptive love to other people. The impact upon you and your life may be felt slowly over time, but if you hear the call, however faintly, you will be changed. It's not just about doing church work, although church work there will be. It is about your being encountered by God and summoned to redirect your thinking, caring, and striving away from mere security,

prosperity, and pleasure toward new concerns that arise from God's redemptive love for this world and its people.

We thank you for your willingness to serve. Please do not be content to serve the church as an institution or organization; rather, serve Jesus Christ in his way, and you will serve his church better. Do not let the big three inhibit you. God will confront them with you – shame, fear, and guilt – and God will lead you through and beyond them. Do not give in to outcome-based thinking. It invariably becomes self-important in its zeal for the cause, high-handed in its methods, and dismissive of people as persons. It loves data and charts and evaluations, but it grows intolerant of curiosity, questions, and human particularities – the very things we need to encourage among the people who are the church. Trust God, and not only when all else fails. Receive each day as a gift, but don't stop there anymore. Receive each day as God's gift but also as the renewal of Jesus' call, "Come, follow me" and learn to fish for people – to represent God's redemptive love to them. Amen.