

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual nourishment; A River of service in Jesus' Name

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany/February 7, 2010
The Reverend E. Clifford Cutler

When we encounter the divine it changes our lives. When we step across the threshold of Saint Paul's, we walk under a relief sculpture of Paul on the road to Damascus where Jesus appeared to him unexpectedly as though "to one untimely born." The sculpture of this event is like a warning label as you enter the church saying that you are going to meet Jesus here and it is going to change your life. When we encounter someone who is really genuine, we see something transcendent there. We want to be like that person. It changes our lives. Peter King, a senior writer for Sports Illustrated, last month noted that dimension in the life of former Washington Redskins football coach Joe Gibbs. He said, "We (reporters) don't write things like this very often in this business. But devout people say and feel devout things and are driven by their relationship with their God. I think Gibbs is one of those people." When we see someone like Joe Gibbs we may not come to the same conclusions but we want to find that transcendent dimension to our lives. It changes us. We hope in this economic recession that one of the take-aways will be a changed pattern of behavior based upon recognition of a transcendent authority. We fear with a great pointing of fingers that this may not be happening. Here we have the story of Peter who makes a killing in the market for fish and finds himself face to face with Jesus. It is the story of how it changed his life.

Jesus takes the initiative in every encounter. The divine always makes the first move, and it's not what we think. Jesus meets us where we are. For Peter, it is on a smelly landing with tired fisherman. The crowd presses in on Jesus to hear the word of God. Jesus turns to Peter not to offer help but to ask for help. Jesus leads with vulnerability that will allow for a closer, more intimate relationship. It is an easy enough mistake to make but I suspect if missionaries who went to Haiti asked for help in relieving the suffering rather than offered help unasked they might not have run afoul of the authorities. Anyway this is Jesus' approach: he asks Peter for help.

And he needs it. He needs an experienced rower to keep the stern of the boat pointed toward shore without drifting one way or the other so that Jesus could sit and teach. Jesus recognizes Peter's skill with a boat thus validating and affirming him as a person. He also has him alone away from his peers so that they can have this encounter uninterrupted. He begins to model the change that he wants to see in Peter. Jesus from Peter's fishing boat is catching people. He is catching their attention, catching their enthusiasm, catching their commitment, even catching them, like Paul, unexpectedly, "as to one untimely born." Peter used his boat to catch fish and they died. Jesus used it to land people and give them life. The two kinds of fishing would soon intersect in the challenge Jesus would make to Peter.

Peter's first response to Jesus was that he was out of his mind. Peter is calculating. There is no way that Jesus' plan can work. After Jesus had finished speaking, instead of thanking Peter he tells him to put out into the deep water and let down his nets for a catch. Any fisherman knows that you fish where the oxygen-rich water of streams and springs flow into the lake at the edges not in the deep. Furthermore Peter's nets are for night fishing not for broad daylight. Peter is exhausted. This landlubber of a carpenter is telling him, a master fisherman, where and when to fish and he has got it all wrong. There is probably no little sarcasm in Peter's words "Yet if you say so (as if you know anything – and you rabbis think you know everything) I will let down the nets." Well, Peter hits the jack pot. It's a net-tearing, boat-swamping catch. Peter signals his partners. He does not call out, as he does not want to give away to others this rich, new fishing ground. This catch of fish represents a huge profit.

This might be the end of the story except that Peter is with Jesus. The encounter is beginning to work a change in him. Jesus has proved his ability to make a lot of money in a hurry, but seems to have a higher commitment to life than that. He has just won the fishing lottery and it appears that Jesus can take it or leave it. How can God be more important than two boatloads of fresh fish? Who is this man who cares more about God and people than about getting rich? Peter finds himself face to face with a person who challenges his priorities on the deepest level. He feels the inadequacy of his own values and priorities. Peter confronts a completely different value system and is challenged to make a choice.

Peter commits himself to Jesus. He realizes that he is in the presence of someone for whom the transcendent is integral to life. Here is authentic holiness and

Peter feels his inadequacy and sinfulness. It is like Isaiah's vision in the Temple. Isaiah is before all the majesty of God and can only exclaim, "I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips." Peter is worried that he will bring down Jesus. Jesus promises that he will raise up Peter. What Peter would discover and Paul would learn is that Jesus died for our sins. They no longer have power over us. Our lives have been transferred to a new authority where there is forgiveness and freedom and life in abundance. Jesus assures Peter that his fishing skills will be needed for a different kind of catch. Where before Peter caught fish and they died, now he will be catching people and bringing them to life.

Peter will join in Jesus' ministry of meeting people where they are, leading with vulnerability, asking for help rather than offering it, drawing others in. Our missionary endeavors must begin in weakness, in order that others will be able to appropriate the strength and power of God. Peter will try to model the change he hopes to see in others. But they, like him at first, will be calculating. This Christian way, they will say, cannot possibly work. It is fishing in all the wrong places. It is the reporter from Sports Illustrated calculatingly admitting that we don't write about the devotion of a Joe Gibbs very often. But then we are struck by the transcendent quality and authenticity of the person and begin to change. We see the overflow of God's compassion and what a haul it is. Our encounter with the divine changes our lives. The final step is commitment. We join Jesus in a care for God and people that surpass the ability to make a lot of money fast. That's what's needed in this economic recession we find ourselves in to move past the calculating to the commitment. If we are attentive enough to get into the boat, or to cross the threshold and encounter Jesus, it will change our lives.

Amen.