

January 26, 2020
Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 9:1-4
Psalm 27:1, 5-13
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Matthew 4:12-23

I've never been much of a fisherperson. That might be because my childhood fisherperson training was quite minimal. I went fishing perhaps twice as a kid, both times with my father, both times in the unbearably sultry summer heat of south Louisiana, and both times without success in actually catching any fish. My father's fishing history of un-success is the stuff of family lore. He even went fishing more often in retirement, but he never got any more successful at it. A fishing master would occasionally invite my father along, and *neither* of them would catch a thing. Despite the ribbing he received, my father was unperturbed; he kept on fishing.

When I consider my father's lifelong fishing record, I have to wonder whether he really *wanted* to catch fish. For his catch's sake, I don't think he wanted to have to *kill* the fish. For his own sake, I don't think he wanted to have to *clean* them. Not everything about fishing is fun, whether you're the fisherperson or the fish.

Today's Gospel reading from Matthew includes Jesus' recruitment of Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John, those fishers-for-fish who become fishers-for-people. Note that, before they could become fishers-for-people, they themselves first had to be caught. Jesus cast his net over those four men and hauled them onto the wooden deck of a tottering boat; in time, they themselves began casting nets and hauling others on board. Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John are metaphorically both fish and fisherpersons. To put it slightly less metaphorically, they are people who got caught *and* people who will catch others.

We say that Jesus called those disciples, and that he calls us, too. Today's Gospel lesson gives us a clue as to what that means: each of *us* has been caught; each of *us* goes fishing for others. It seems to me that the word *call* might be just a little too tame for all of this. Being caught isn't necessarily a joyride for a fish; catching fish isn't all fun and games. How much higher the stakes must be when we're talking about human catch. It probably doesn't help that we know just how dangerous it was for those first disciples. Of the original Twelve, tradition has it that ten were martyred and one, Judas, died by suicide.

Fortunately, we live in a time and place far from martyrdom. Still, many people bring fear and trepidation to church with them, and they have good reasons to be concerned. If I go to church, what will I lose? If I go to church, what will it cost? If I go to church, will I be scaled, gutted, and filleted? If I go to church, will I be asked to scale, gut, and fillet others?

Those were certainly questions I asked myself as I floated my way back to the Christian faith after many years away. Surely not the fisherperson then, I repeatedly goldfished up to and away from the tattered net that swirled in the dark waters around me. But something kept luring me back, and eventually I got close enough to be gathered up, lifted from the water, and unceremoniously dumped onto the wooden deck of a newer but still tottering boat. I wasn't really scaled, gutted, and filleted, but I did flop around for a while. Eventually I become one of the deckhands. I was changed, and that change wasn't always easy.

It may be worth noting here that the Christian life is seldom linear. Instead, it's more cyclical, such that sometimes we are the fish, and sometimes we do the fishing. In that, I suppose it's more of a catch-and-release program. God's grace beckons us up to the net, and eventually we get close enough to be swept up. The Holy Spirit whispers that we should cast that net, and we heave it over despite our doubt. All this happens not once, but over and over again. Caution is understandable.

Fortunately, it's possible to be simultaneously cautious and courageous. We need courage because, though we're tempted to hope that this Christian enterprise won't cost us anything, in our heart of hearts, we know it's not true. As Christians, we need to say, "God loves you," *and* we need to say, "God's fullness is approached as you learn to love with integrity." The better we learn to love, the deeper the pain of that love affects us.

In our lives as Christians, we remain both human fish, and fishers of humans. Each of us brings our experience of being caught to our work as fisherpersons. We proclaim the gospel with power because we have experienced that gospel. We bring our whole lives and selves with us to this enterprise of being Christians. It is the fullness of our experience—both joy and sorrow, both hurt and healing—that enables us to genuinely share the good news with others.

Flopping fish and flailing deckhands, here we are on the wooden deck of this particular tottering boat called St. Thomas's. We have arrived here via very different paths, but we have a common conviction that our shared journey is worth the effort, that what we have found here is worth sharing. There have been many changes in recent years, but we're still sailing along just fine.

Today is annual meeting day. I hope you can attend. Yes, it's a boring business meeting, and it's more than that. It's a celebration to acknowledge that God has miraculously brought us together in this place and this time. We don't always know how our fishing expeditions will turn out: we don't know what will eventually happen when we are caught, or what will eventually happen when we cast our nets. We should try not to fret, because our tottering boat is more sound than it looks, and we're sailing in life-giving water. God's grace is with us, and the Holy Spirit is guiding us. In faith, we do our best, and we give it to God, "who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine."¹

Notes

¹ Ephesians 3:20, NRSV.