

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany - February 8, 2004

Racial Justice Sunday

Anne G. Cohen

Luke 5:1-11

For Our Reflection:

Love is not concerned with whom you pray or where you slept the night you ran away from home. Love is concerned that the beating of your heart should kill no one.

- Alice Walker (SLT #564)

The Nets of Democracy

Who can name all of the Democrat candidates for President in this year's primaries? Howard Dean (UCC), John Kerry, John Edwards, Carol Moseley Braun, Dick Gephardt, Joe Lieberman, Wesley Clark, Al Sharpton, Dennis Kucinich, Ed Begley Jr. (just kidding)...

These folks are engaged in an ancient line of work - net fishing. Each one is searching the waters for that miraculously GIGANTIC catch of voters who will collectively sink the boats of the competition as they leap into the nets of the Chosen One. They are issuing a Call to all who would be disciples - to "Come. Follow me."

And the ones who follow will, supposedly, be the ones who share that particular fisherperson's world view and vision. They will be the ones who are willing to do the grunt work involved in turning the world in that direction.

The Nets of Democracy are being cast all around us. The air is filled with the singing of the nets as they fly through the air with some amount of velocity and intensity - arriving as media advertisements, telephone solicitations, mass mailings on candidates and issues, stealth email, debate coverage, campaign coverage, precinct walkers and more.

The fisherpeople are hard at work hurling the Nets of Democracy at us. But how does this relate to our spiritual life? And how do we respond to this onslaught with discernment, faithfulness and responsible citizenship?

If we go back to the biblical text from whence this ancient metaphor came, we might be able to find some rhyme or reason for this season of frenzied activity, some clues to a spiritual response.

Our story in Luke chapter five is a "call" story. It comes early in the Gospel. Jesus has just been rejected by his hometown. He has begun his career as healer and teacher, and his reputation, his candidacy for front-runner, has momentum.

At the lakeside he steps into a recently redocked fishing boat - Simon/Peter's, to be precise. Jesus and Simon are acquainted - Jesus was in his home and had healed his mother-in-law from a fever. But Simon is not yet a disciple. Jesus steps into the boat, sits down (just as a rabbi sits in

the synagogue) and teaches the crowd on the shore.

After awhile Jesus instructs the boat owner to put out into the lake - where they've been all night fishing and failing. And he tells them to throw their nets again. Simon points out their all-night failure and fatigue - but then complies. They promptly catch a HUGE batch of fish - so many that the nets are threatening to break. He has to ask another boat crew to come and help them drag nets and fish into the boats. The boats are in danger of sinking from the load - a sign of a miraculous success.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, Simon/Peter is on his knees - in awe of the apparently divine powers of this healer/rabbi/fisherman/Messiah. He is begging for forgiveness - perhaps for his inherent sinfulness - or for a generic lack of faith - or (as is possible in literature) for something he hasn't even done yet.

This same story is told in the Gospel of John - at the very end. In John 21 Jesus has already been crucified and his tomb found empty. He has appeared to Mary but not yet to the men. In John, Peter had already denied Jesus three times - and would be expected to beg forgiveness. And, in John, the command from Jesus to Simon Peter is more thorough: "If you love me, feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep." Oh, and remember to "Follow me!"

John's "call" story is to those who never knew Jesus alive - you too can be disciples and follow. What you need to do is feed the hungry, tend to the needs of those who cannot meet their own needs. Do these things for the love of Messiah. Your loving actions will be the nets that draw all those you touch into God's beloved community.

This story - as we heard it told in Luke this morning - very early in the Gospel - is the "call" on the lips of a still living Jesus. His response to Simon and his partners, James and John Zebedee's sons - is this. "Don't be in AWE. From now on follow me and catch people instead of fish." But he doesn't say what they are catching them for. Will they be voters for the Zealot party candidate in the next election? Support staff for a political or religious or social change agenda? Who will these people be and what will they all do once they sign on? Start a new reformed synagogue? Open a battered women's shelter? Build a youth group? Do civil disobedience down at Roman military headquarters? Nail 95 challenges to the door of the Jerusalem Temple? All of the above?

This story doesn't really EXPLAIN anything. It has a Mission Statement: "Come with me and Catch People." But the goals and objectives are not laid out here. This story points to something. And the object of the pointing was more obvious to Luke's audience than it is to us.

This story uses a metaphor that was very familiar to Luke's audience - AND to Jesus' community. Fishermen catching people is a direct reference to the prophet Jeremiah who lived 600 years earlier. Jeremiah was from the Northern Kingdom (as was Jesus). He witnessed the Babylonian invasion that hauled many Jews off into Exile (as Jesus, similarly, watched the Roman invasion and occupation of his country).

Later, Jeremiah found himself in exile in Egypt. He believed the condition of invasion and exile

was God's retaliation for Israel's insistence on Royal Religion or Temple Worship. He felt that the only hope for survival for Jews in Exile was obedience to the commandments themselves and to the Covenant of Moses with God. Their only hope was to re-internalize the faith - live out it's precepts in daily life and quit depending on external trappings and locations and hierarchies of power for spiritual guidance (much as Jesus taught).

Jesus was picking up Jeremiah's mantle here and urging THE PEOPLE to become the Temple within themselves - to live the covenant in home and workplace and street. And he made this clear by using the fishing metaphor. Jeremiah 16:14-16 is part of a sermon talking about God's restoration of Israel and the calling home of the Exiles. It is, for the Exiles, a text of HOPE.

Therefore, the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when it shall no longer be said, "As the Lord lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of Egypt," but "As the Lord lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them." For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their ancestors. I am now sending for many fishermen, says the Lord, and they shall catch them; and afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks.

Jeremiah's "fishermen" refers to the Egyptians (Isaiah 19:5-10) and his "hunters" refers to the Babylonians (Lamentations 4:18-19).

By using Jeremiah's words, Jesus is making it clear that he is calling the Exiles home in a time of Restoration. The restoration in this case is the demise of Royal Religion or Temple Worship. It is the internalization of the faith - the living out of that faith wherever we are in our lives, in the world. The Exiles that he is calling to are the marginalized, the sick, the prostitutes, widows, orphans, Northerners, Samaritans, lepers, collaborators, anyone who has strayed or been shunned.

In addition any one who knew the Jeremiah tradition might interpret Jesus to be saying that God would also drive the occupying Roman forces from Israel and restore the land of their ancestors. That's the problem with metaphors - they are open to misinterpretation.

So, who are the people being called? The Exiles. What are they called to do? Be obedient to the Covenant of Moses, a covenant of abiding friendship and collaboration with God. There is no separation of church and state in Jesus' time or culture - or in God. Collaboration with God means a restoration of God's intention for ALL of human society. It is ALL of consequence to God. The political is personal and vice versa.

The Exiles are being called home to reestablish God's Society - which is just, which is righteous, which is economically socialist, politically participatory, radically egalitarian, jubilant and terrifying - depending on your current power quotient.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner translates the Hebrew word for POLITICS (t'koon') as meaning REPAIR. He refers to a passage in Exodus (immediately following the Ten Utterances or

Commandments) that parallels the meaning of the passage in Isaiah that Jesus read aloud in his home synagogue:

You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me, and My anger shall blaze forth and I will put you to the sword, and your own wives shall become widows and your children orphans. If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, do not act toward them as a creditor: Exact no interest from them.

(Exodus 22:20-24)

Kushner's interpretation is that what we do to each other we literally do to God.

Energy in the form of light is trapped in gross matter. Sparks of holiness are imprisoned in the stuff of creation. They yearn to be set free, reunited with their Source through human action. When we return something to its proper place, where it belongs, where it was meant to be; when we use something in a sacred way or for a holy purpose; when we treat another human being as a human being, the captive sparks are released and the cosmos is healed. This liberation of light is called the Repair of Creation. The process occurs also within each individual... Each human being is at the same time both riddled with divine sparks and in desperate need of repair. Each person is the whole world. And every human action therefore plays a role in the final restitution. Whatever we do is related to this ultimate task: To return all things to their original place in God... Rabbi Elazar said, "The whole Torah depends on justice... when people transgress justice, God exacts retribution from them [like exile or occupation] and thereby instructs humanity... the people of Jerusalem were not banished until they disregarded justice."

Rabbi Kushner continues:

In order to be politically effective you need a sense of where you are in the universe and where the universe is in you. You must have a realistic appraisal of your power, that is, where you stand, and you must have a sense of the spirit of the times... Politics is getting others to join you. You can use this power to help others who have less to get more. You may do so through confrontation or coalition, force or persuasion. If you do nothing, those in power will certainly use your inaction to increase their power...

(The Book of Words, pp.83-85)

Who are the people being called by Jesus? The Exiles - those who have been shunned or shoved out of power. What are they AND we called to do? To abide by the Covenant of Moses, a covenant of enduring friendship and collaboration with God in the interest of Justice. To allow for no separation of church and state when it comes to Justice. To collaborate with God in a restoration of God's intention for ALL of human society.

The Exiles/we are being called home to put things back where they belong; to REPAIR and reestablish God's Society - which is just, which is righteous, which is economically socialist, politically participatory, radically egalitarian, jubilant and terrifying - depending on your current

power quotient.

Whatever political party or persuasion we feel is most Just, that is where we must direct our life energy, our spiritual energy. The Nets of Democracy are airborne. We are being called home. We have work to do. From now on, we will be catching people.

Bulletin

WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION

Music for Gathering

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Musical Preparation for Worship – A Time for Centering

+ Call to Worship

One: The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own;

Many: Not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own;

One: Not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth;

Many: Not to form an outward regularity, but to touch inward springs;

One: Not to bind them by ineradicable prejudices to our particular sect or peculiar notions,

Many: But to prepare them for impartial, conscientious judging of whatever subjects may be offered to their decision;

One: Not to burden the memory, but to quicken and strengthen the power of thought;

Many: Not to impose religion upon them in the form of arbitrary rules, but to awaken the conscience, the moral discernment.

One: In a word, the great end is to awaken the soul, to excite and cherish spiritual life.

+ Hymn of Change

Turning of the World

CBS # 54

+ Our Common Prayer (unison)

Creator God who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, And forgive us our debts As we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil, For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Time for Silent Reflection

One: My soul waits in silence.

All: God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.

Silent Reflection

The Assurance of Good News (unison)

Holy One of Blessing, Your Presence fills Creation.

We are Blessed by You in every Breath.

Sung Response “Hallelujah... God be praised!” (CSB #5 Refrain)

WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM

Just Peace Moment

Conversation with Our Children

Reading from the Christian Gospels Luke 5:1-1

Sermon The Nets of Democracy

WE RESPOND TO GOD’S INVITATION

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements

Call to Prayer *Be still and know that I am God* Hymnal # 743

Time for Silence

Our Joys and Concerns and an Offering of Prayer

Sung Response *In Solitude* Hymnal #521 vv. 1 & 2

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer

Offertory

Prayer of Dedication (unison)

All gifts have their origin in You, O God, the source of all creative and healing energy. We rejoice when Your love finds a faint echo in our lives. We sense our destiny when Your grace moves through us to touch another. Help us to learn to be open and vulnerable to the needs of Your world and to respond with the generous spirit of Christ. Amen.

+ **Sending Hymn** *The Gift of Love* CBS # 38

+ **Commissioning** (unison)

The blessing of truth be upon us, the power of love direct us and sustain us, and may the peace of this community preserve our going out and our coming in, from this time forth, until we meet again.

+ **Sung Response** (we gather in some semblance of a circle) Song from Ghana

+ **Postlude**

WORSHIP NOTES

Call to Worship is by William Ellery Channing, Singing the Living Tradition (#652)

Commissioning is by Duke T. Gray Ibid #684