Fifth Sunday after Epiphany February 10, 2019

All Saints’ Church Year C

Isaiah 6:1-8, [9-13] I Corinthians 15:1-11

Psalm 138 Luke 5:1-11

We give thanks to you O Lord with our whole heart. Amen

The phrase, “I will make you fishermen of men,” or “from now on you will be catching people,” or “fishing for people” has never resonated with me.

I understand, and I can even relate to, the excitement for Simon and his crew when they pull in a large haul of fish, especially after a night of hard labor and empty nets. I get that, but the image itself is disturbing.

As the nets, now large with so many fish, nearly breaking, are pulled into the boats, fish are writhing in last gasps before their death. They are food to be consumed, trapped in the nets, and soon to be dead fish on ice. I grew up in the Northwest and often went to Pike Street Market in Seattle, where fish merchants, above all other merchants, were featured, as they exposed their catches in beautiful displays of ice and color, even celebratory song. All I remember are the eyes of dead fish- looking out at me, and it freaked me out.

Those dead fish eyes even appeared in my nightmares.

This Gospel passage became more liberating for me when I learned the Greek translation: The verb “catch” is about ***taking*** men and women fully alive, for the Kingdom, by saving them, by rescuing them from the perils of emptiness.

In other words, to be “catching people” is to be releasing us from the stifling nets of our own making.

That’s what makes this story (like Isaiah’s story) a “Call Narrative.” Jesus calls out to us, waving his hand, to come, to be with him, even though he is walking into suffering. He is preaching about liberty in the face of that suffering. He is calling out to us, to leave behind those nets, even when they are bursting with success, to “leave everything and follow him.”

Jesus wants us to leave behind ***the fantasy*** that success, ego, power, and all the manipulative skills we use to avoid suffering, will win in the end. They will NOT win. Those are just stifling nets of our own making and we are trapped in them, dying, no different than those dead fish on ice. Jesus is looking lovingly upon us- seeing us trapped, and he is beckoning us to follow him so that we can live in liberty.

One of the strangest places I saw this “Call Narrative” lived out was- of all places- in Saudi Arabia. I had been invited by the Minister of Education, Prince Faisal bin Abdullah, to come to Saudi Arabia, Riyadh and Jeddah in particular, to talk with him and his staff, his ministers, and the principals, deans, instructors throughout some of the Arabian high schools.

Not only were they interested in the way I was studying the Qur’an with my students, but they were curious about my teaching methodology that put students at the center of class.

To go to Saudi Arabia, you must be invited. There are no tourists. Everything is arranged… visas, first class airline tickets, hotels, drivers, and itineraries. A very expensive structure to maintain the hierarchy of privilege and power and isolation.

The only time my schedule coincided with the Prince’s schedule was the week of Christmas. I decide to go anyway.

The red carpet was rolled out. As I landed in Riyadh, I was given an abiyah to wear by the stewardess, though I had one in my carry on, and as I exited down the steps of the plane, fully covered, I was met by officials in a fancy black car. They took me to a luxurious waiting room, treated me to a coffee, while other officials handled the mundane business of customs, visa verification, and luggage.

A half-hour or so later, I was escorted to another luxurious black car, and my driver was taking me to my hotel, one designed by women and only for women.

My driver was Pilipino. Our eyes connected in his rear-view mirror. It was Christmas Eve, just about midnight, and I said, “Merry Christmas. I am sure that I am taking you away from your family’s celebration and I am sorry for that, but I am thankful to be with you.” No comment, no recognition, no nod of the head.

He picked me up the next morning, and I said, “Merry Christmas.” Again, no recognition, but as the day went on, he began to talk. His English was excellent. And then near the end of day, he looked up through the rear-view mirror and said, “I am Christian. My name is Rizal. Merry Christmas to you as well.”

I felt this chill down my spine. I knew what it meant for Rizal to trust me. We held each other in silence, and then I said, “Thank you.” And then I was full of questions. “What is it like to be Christian in a country where Christianity is outlawed? How do you find places to worship? How do you communicate with each other? Who are your ministers?”

Rizal was passionate about his faith; that the limits imposed by the country only enhanced the power of his community. He had been born a Christian in the Philippines, but this Christian community was different. Networks arranged, secret meetings established; signs agreed upon. All were welcome; all were taken care of; all were loved, no matter their nationality, their status, their gender. Everything mattered.

They trusted each other with their lives. They found ways to use every day Arabian ceremonies to express their faith. They protected each other and inspired each other. For Rizal, it was all about following Jesus, no matter where Jesus was taking him. Suffering be damned. Vulnerability be honored. The Holy Spirit was alive and well, linking him, in the midst of all the suffering, to a life filled with liberty and joy.

I think this is what Richard Rohr means when he says that “the cross is not just a singular event. It’s a statement from God ***that reality*** has a cruciform pattern. Jesus was killed in a collision of cross-purposes, conflicting interests, and half-truths, caught between the demands of an empire and the religious establishment of his day. The cross was the price Jesus paid for living in a ‘mixed’ world, which is both human and divine.”

Jesus invites us to follow him and to leave those nets of our own making, no matter how “full” they appear, and to walk with him; to trust in his divinity and in the rising of our own spark of divinity bestowed upon us by God, all in the midst of a very human journey.

What does this mean? I easily saw that the absurdity of Saudi Arabia’s desire to keep women from driving as a way to protect them, actually put them in the back seat of a car in the company of a man who during the week spent more time with them than they spent with their own husbands. “A collision of cross-purposes, conflicting interests, and half-truths.” Easy to see and to critique. What absurdity. We could even call it sin.

But what about this absurdity? My eighteen-year-old niece sent me this text on Wednesday night about 10:00 pm my time. She is in her first year in college in Ellensburg, WA, attending my alma mater. “Aunt Jamie, there was an active shooter on campus tonight, everyone I know is fine, Tyler [her best friend] and I were on campus but left class as soon as we found out. We are home safe now, but I wanted to text you and let you know that I’m safe just in case you saw anything about it on the news.”

Isn’t it absurd that our children no longer feel safe in their schools? Sinful even. And as a country we’re not doing anything about it, because the reality of living always involves “a collision of cross-purposes, conflicting interests, and half-truths.”

What are we to do? Not find scape-goats, or arm ourselves with righteousness, arguments, and attacks, or make strong power plays or win political clout. These are all nets of our own making, rendering us no different than fish, writhing in their own last gasps. Rather, Jesus says, “take up the cross, and follow me.”

When we look at Jesus on the cross, we see vulnerability, exposure, love, forgiveness, innocence, and hope. What would happen if we used these gifts as a way to have the very difficult conversations, we need to have in our own country about gun control, race, sexual assault, climate change, and a decent living wage.

I am not naïve enough to think this is going to happen anytime soon. There’s just too much sin in the world. And we are all just too human to put down our armor and be vulnerable with each other. To be honest and loving. Yet, this is the way of Jesus.

Maybe, when nothing else works, we will give it a try. Maybe when the world looks more like the desolation that is foretold in Isaiah, authoritarian, less just, with the chasm between the haves and have nots too great to sustain, we, like Rizal, will have no choice but to follow the way of Jesus…and in that following, trust that our divinity will become more accessible, and our humanity more profound. AMEN