

## Jesus and the net

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 7, 2010.

*When they brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.* Luke 5: 11

When Jesus sets out to call together his disciples, he goes to the Lake of Gennesaret, also known as the Sea of Galilee or the Sea of Tiberius. This body of water thirteen miles long and eight miles wide lies 680 feet below sea level and at certain times the area becomes quite warm and humid. In Jesus' time there were nine towns clustered around the shore with sizable populations. One of my most deeply spiritual experiences was to be there out on the Sea of Galilee, watching the fishermen with their nets while hearing the scriptures read relating to Jesus with the fishermen.

When he was not preaching in the temple, Jesus was out where people lived and worked. His church was the lakeshore, his pulpit an open boat. In the gospel narrative today, it is on the shores of that lake that Jesus finds the fishermen, Peter, James, John and later Andrew. He knows that they are the kind of workers he needs to accomplish his mission. When he learns that they have caught nothing after working out on the water all night, he tells them to cast their nets in the deeper waters. These burly fishermen are not about to be told by an itinerate preacher how to do their job, but they do as he said and cast their nets in the other direction. To their amazement, they haul in so large a catch that it strains their nets and weighs down their boats.

Overwhelmed with feelings of unworthiness, Peter tells Jesus to go away. He feels unworthy to be so near this dynamic source of God's power and strength. Eventually, Peter, James, John and Andrew feel compelled to lay aside their nets and leave their jobs, their families and personal security to become fishers of people. They are so completely transformed by him that their lives are never again the same.

The significance of Jesus asking them to cast their nets on the other side is that he sees his mission extending beyond his own people to include everyone, Jew and Gentile alike. As disciples, the fishermen are going to be fishing for greater numbers far beyond those waters.

How many times do we do things the same way with little or no result, only to find that if we change direction and try another approach, we get results? It is all in our attitude. Do we see a situation as a problem or as a challenge? Do we approach things the same way or are we willing to try possible solutions that haven't been considered before?

Our job as Christians is to be proactive in finding new and different ways to be fishers of people. We Episcopalians have tended to be very private and have been reluctant to witness to what our faith means to us. It was said that if you cross a Jehovah's Witness with an Episcopalian, you get someone who knows how to knock on a door but doesn't know what to say! I believe that is changing. I am finding that we are more and more open to sharing what our faith means to us and how it applies to our daily living. Though you might not call it witnessing, that's what it is. When you invite friends to join you at church, you might not think of it as evangelism, but that's what it is. The fact remains that inviting someone to church is far more effective evangelism than all the massive stadium rallies ever held. Nothing takes the place of one person inviting another to share what the Christian faith means to them.

Timidity is one of the greatest obstacles to sharing our faith. We are often too timid to talk about faith because we don't want to impose our personal beliefs on others. Sharing what our

faith means to us does not imply that others are wrong or that we have all the answers. One of the great principles of the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century is our responsibility to testify to what we believe. People are drawn to be part of the church when they see we are practicing what we believe.

To be a disciple and follower of Christ requires energy, determination and discipline. It is no coincidence that discipline and disciple are similar. To be a disciple is to be one who is taught. To study a certain field is to be learned in that discipline. It takes discipline to be a disciple. Whether or not someone accepts what we say largely depends on our doing what we say we believe. If there is too much of a gap between what we say and who we are, it is unconvincing. Living what we believe is the ultimate test of authenticity.

It is said that Christianity is more often caught than taught. In the search for greater depth and meaning, we are discovering how God is acting in our lives to overcome our doubts, our fears and uncertainties. It isn't enough to be taught about Christ, we have to be caught by his example. To be sure, there is a risk in following a first century preacher in twenty-first century culture. There will be those who laugh and scorn at what they perceive as naïve and unrealistic, but there is no greater life of service than being a disciple of Christ Jesus.

Have you ever wondered how a modern day Jesus would carry out his mission? Would he go out and call people together by networking with a blog, texting, twitter, facebook? There is something rather impersonal about voiceless, faceless written information on a screen that lacks the human touch. While it saves a great deal of time and travel and cost, there is still no substitute for reaching people where they are in one on one, face-to-face human contact.

In many ways, the ministry of evangelism requires good marketing and salesmanship. Whether in evangelism or sales, what is required is belief in the product. A potential buyer can see through a salesperson who is more interested in making the sale than in the value of the product. Likewise, people want to see that we are truly following the one in whom we say we believe. Effective evangelism means listening, not pressuring. It is all about timing and presentation when and how we present the case for Christ.

Being an evangelist and ambassador for Christ is both a high calling and a gentle art. Don't miss your calling. The Holy Spirit supplies us with all we need. You better believe it!