

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/7/2010, Epiphany 5C
Isaiah 6:1-8, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, Luke 5:1-11
Dogged Discipleship

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is a sermon in praise of dogged discipleship. Sometimes, in God's good providence, we enjoy a season of spiritual refreshment. But not always. From time to time, we need to press on with determined step, even if we are feeling weary and dull inside. Sometimes we are like Garrison Keillor's Norwegian bachelor farmer -- the one who eats his oatmeal in the morning because it helps him "to get up and do *what has to be done*."

My beginning text is St. Peter's cry of humility:

⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." (Luke 5:8, RSV)

But, thanks be to God, *this* our Lord Jesus is unwilling to do. He is unwilling to depart from the sinful one. How can he who so lovingly beckoned to folks then turn around and depart from them? Think of our Lord's inclination toward the poor sinner in that passage about the physician:

¹¹And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners? ¹²But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. ¹³But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. (Matthew 9:11-13, KJV)

And again,

²⁸Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30, KJV)

No, Jesus is not likely to depart from Peter, though Peter knows himself to be "a sinful man." Peter might depart from Jesus, and, alas, he does as our Lord's cross draws near. But Jesus is not one to depart from the sinful man.

Still, there is something natural and right about Peter's cry. Peter is a fisherman. He knows the ways of the sea and the patterns of the fish. He knows that he does not usually catch fish in the morning sunshine. That is the time for

mending and washing his nets after a night of work. But this particular morning, he has caught fish at the word of Jesus. Oh! Such fish! The nets are breaking. The boats are heavy in the water with the catch of fish. Peter knows that something awfully *sovereign* has just taken place. He who is Master of wind and waves and the fishes of the deep has spoken, and Peter, bless him, has enough sensitivity of soul to know that he stands on holy ground. He senses that he is unworthy to be there. He cannot help himself and so he lets out his cry of humility: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

We encounter such a cry elsewhere in this morning’s Bible readings. There is a double unity to these Lessons. First off, they are all about the divine call to ministry. Isaiah, St. Paul, and St. Peter: they are all called by God to speak for him. Whatever else they were doing must now be set aside. Peter must lay aside his fishing nets, Paul must stop his persecuting and though he might be “the least of the apostles,” as he puts it, an *apostle* he is to be in any case. And Isaiah must turn from his transcendent vision of God Most High and go: go where the Lord will send him, and speak whatever the Lord would have him speak. So, that is one unity: the holy office of prophet and apostle.

But there is another unity, and this is the one I wonder about. It is the cry of humility. It is almost the cry of despair.

From Isaiah, the lament bursts forth:

⁵And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5, RSV)

From St. Paul, the troubled memories and sorrow over his former life find expression even in his claiming of apostolic authority. Surely, he is forgiven for his sins, yet he does not forget them:

⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (1 Corinthians 15:8-9, NRSV)

And the impetuous voice of St. Peter is perhaps the most plain and stark of all:

“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” (Luke 5:8, RSV)

Such cries of humility fascinate me. I am inclined to view them as true blessings from God. Such cries of humility might not be fun, but at least they are not dull! Isaiah, Paul, and Peter are not walking with dogged step at that point of cry. Their souls are stirred! They are stirred with a vision of God and of their unworthiness to stand before Him, but at least they are stirred! This is not an arid, weary time for them.

And there is Biblical emotion in the other direction too: not the cry of despair, but the cry of joy. It was not long ago that we celebrated Mary's *Magnificat*. It was not long ago that we admired the joy in that young woman's heart that caused her tongue to sing:

⁴⁶And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior... (Luke 1:46-47, RSV)

The reason I emphasize both the cry of humility and the cry of joy is that sometimes we must do without either one. Sometimes this happens to Christians: our steps become dogged. We continue onwards, but with neither humility nor joy driving us. We go onwards not because we enjoy it, but simply because there's no other way to keep step with Jesus. He moves on along his good path. If we would stick with him, we must move onwards too.

I preached on these texts earlier this week at a clergy retreat with friends -- some of them old friends going back to Seminary days. This morning's readings seemed like natural texts for a sermon to parish pastors who are both conscious of their divine call to ministry and perhaps a little weary after a bout of hospitalization or congregational conflict (as some congregations sometimes suffer), or maybe simply tired after a quarter century of ministry. So, I wrote that sermon with them in mind and on my heart.

But in the back of my mind, I suspected that I was going to want to preach a version of that sermon to you too. Aye, and for a good Lutheran reason: Luther's great teaching of the doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers means that your Christian path is every bit as important to God as that of the highest bishop or even the Pope, God bless him.

Whatever your vocation in life, whether you are a contractor, an attorney, a nurse, a teacher, a sweeper of the sidewalks, or whatever law-abiding work you are doing, that work is of high spiritual importance to your Maker. It is your location in life for offering with joy and thanksgiving the work of your hands and heart, mind and muscles. It is your location for serving God and your neighbor in love and therefore it is your holy ministry.

That is why I am trying to preach this sermon in praise of dogged discipleship. I want us to carry on with our Christian life even when we are bereft of strong emotions about it.

So, let us begin our praise of resolute discipleship by noting this theme in today's Gospel Lesson: When Peter cried out "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man!" Christ did not answer him, "Hold that thought! Preserve that set of your soul." Rather he launched Peter into a new business. Henceforth, Peter was to be, not a fisher of fish, but a fisher of people. And so, Jesus said:

"Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men." (Luke 5:8, RSV)

Again, when Peter said, "I am a sinful man," Jesus did not answer "Preserve that notion in your heart. Maintain that sentiment. Then you will be useful to me." No, our Lord simply said, "Follow me," and Peter up and followed.

And when Mary sang her *Magnificat*, no angel of the Lord whispered to her, "Mary, continue in that joy. This old world needs such joy. You help supply it." Just the reverse, Mary was told that a sword would pierce her heart (Luke 2:35). We do not praise Mary simply because she sang with joy about her Son, but more fundamentally, because she proved a faithful disciple of her Son.

From these observations, I want to suggest that both the mountaintop experience and the shattering vision of Christ that cast Paul to the ground - *both* kinds of experiences - are best viewed as occasional gifts from God. Neither their presence, nor absence, can change the call of Christ to follow him.

What did the resurrected Jesus say to Peter, the one who had thrice denied him? What did he say to Peter when he wondered about some other disciple? Did he not say to Peter...

What is that to thee? Follow thou me.

In the end, the best that any of us is going to be able to say is to join the determination of St. Paul to press on:

¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13-14, NRSV)

The important thing in daily life is not whether you or I are trudging onward without benefit of either weal or woe, but rather the nature of the path along which we are trudging.

Are we doing our job the best we can? At the end of the day, when we lay our head down on the pillow, can we say a final prayer, asking the Lord to accept our day's work and bring good from it, because we did the best we could and we at least wanted to and meant that day to love God and our neighbor?

Each of us, I bet, has some theory, some convictions, about what could make our Christian life better -- perhaps not happier, perhaps not ecstatic or peaceful -- but better in the plain old-fashioned sense of doing our work well and not letting other people down.

We can be more careful with our words, to not hurt and cut people. We can renew our determination to be people of truth, so that when we say we will do something, it becomes like money in the bank. We can enter into therapy if the wounds of childhood are simply too much for us to carry. We can renew our friendships and strengthen relationships with colleagues.

And we can stop judging ourselves overmuch. It is not right for any of us to conclude that our labors have been in vain, that our work hasn't amounted to

much, that we have not touched a single soul in all these years, for these things belong to God and are often mysterious and hidden to us.

The Triune God is the One who can see the end from the beginning. The Triune God is the One who can see the true result of our dogged discipleship in the life of those who have counted on us, in those who listened to us when we did not even know they were listening, in those who have benefited from our work when we did not even know they were being blessed through us.

Sometimes, we need simply to eat our oatmeal and get up and do what has to be done. But do it in the confidence that you are not alone, that Jesus will never depart from you, and that the Holy Trinity can bring much good from your labors. I mean, God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory now and forever. Amen.