

Go Fish!

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Virginia Highland Church – Atlanta, Georgia

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – February 7, 2010

Texts: Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

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This week I got an e-mail that included the heartfelt question, “Where is Virginia Highland Church headed, or is it headed anywhere?”

Those of you who read our e-newsletter, the Luminary, will know that I replied simply, “It’s headed where we lead it. Being here makes all the difference...” This is the point I was trying to make two Sundays ago when I spoke about us as the Body of Christ, fulfilling Jesus’ call to bring good news, proclaim deliverance, provide insight, free the oppressed, and proclaim God’s favor. And I encouraged each one of us to participate in the all church visioning retreat the last Saturday of this month, February 27th, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” (Proverbs 29:18)

Whenever I get questions about, “Why isn’t the church doing this?” or “Why isn’t the church doing that?” I suggest that the church may not be doing what is wanted because some of us as individuals are not doing what we think it should do. After all, I like to remind everyone, you are the church! Perhaps the question any one of us might have about why the church isn’t doing something here or there is to ask ourselves how we can make it happen. Maybe we need to hear our own question as a calling, an invitation that God has placed on our heart to fulfill a particular ministry.

In case you haven’t noticed, the scriptures during these Sundays following Epiphany have been filled with stories of how we—each of us and collectively—have been called to serve God’s purpose in the world. Hearing these invitations of recent weeks has been an epiphany, an aha, a “wow” experience.

Isaiah urged, “Arise, shine, for your light has come”—in other words, get off your pew and proclaim a God that belongs to everybody, not just us. (Isaiah 60:1a). The psalmist prayed, “Give the king your justice”—in other words, it’s time to challenge our leaders and legislators and judges to do justice for the “weak and needy,” to save them “from oppression and violence.” (Psalm 72:1, 13-14) The apostle Paul envisioned in his letter to the church at Ephesus, “that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known”—that we might tell the world that diversity is a good thing, a godly thing. (Ephesians 3:10).

Through Isaiah, God spoke to spiritual exiles returning to the spiritual community, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, and you are mine”—in other words, we belong here; this is our church too. (Isaiah 43:1b) The Acts of the Apostles and John the Baptist reminded us that we need not just baptism by water but also by the Holy Spirit—not just religious ritual but spiritual ecstasy. (Acts 8:17, Luke 3:16) As Jesus heard at his own baptism, we too must hear in our baptisms that we are beloved children of God. (Luke 3:22)

Isaiah reminded us that we will no longer be termed forsaken, but fertile, and God’s delight. (Isaiah 62:4) In his letter to Corinth Paul told us that “to each [of us] is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (1 Corinthians 12:7) And at the wedding of Cana, Jesus blesses our relationships, transforming the ordinary into something extraordinary. (John 2:1-11).

Ezra reminded us “the joy of the Lord is your strength” on the same Sunday the psalmist bore witness that the heavens themselves proclaim the glory of God, so why shouldn’t we by the way we live? (Nehemiah 8:10, Psalm 19). Jesus declared “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to proclaim the year of God’s favor” even as we heard Paul declare that we share in that glory and that calling as the Body of Christ, the church. (Luke 4:18-19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a)

But last Sunday and today, another dimension has been added to these calls from God—a sense of unworthiness. Last week, the prophet Jeremiah responded to God’s call by saying, “I am only a boy”—in other words, I’m not grown up enough or experienced enough to fulfill the call. (Jeremiah 1:6) And we heard the skeptical responses of Jesus’ hometown congregation to his call to proclaim God’s favor, “Is this not this Joseph’s son?” prompting Jesus to observe that “no prophet is accepted in his hometown” even as he is driven out by those with whom he had grown up. (Luke 4:22, 24)

And today, reading of Isaiah’s call to serve God, we hear the prophet cry out, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” And Peter, when observing Jesus’ miraculous fishing abilities, falls down on his knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” And the apostle Paul, speaking of his own call by the risen Christ, writes the church at Corinth, “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” All three of these men have a past that they think prevents them from serving God. Isaiah has guilty lips, as do all around him. In awe of Jesus’ holiness, Simon Peter admits he’s a mere sinner. And, worst of all, the apostle Paul had been a Christian-basher as a religious fundamentalist.

It's well that we consider the unworthiness of those whom God called on the pages of scripture, because we are all unworthy in one way or another: too young, too inexperienced, too old, too jaded, too familiar, too elitist, too profane, too plainspoken, too sinful, too fearful, too reactionary, too violent. These are the terrible "toos"—too this or too that--we may contemplate during the penitential season of Lent that begins a week from this Wednesday. To all of these too's, these doubts of worthiness, Jesus says, as he said to the fishermen by lake, "Do not be afraid..." Isaiah is sent a seraph to purge his lips. Paul is sent God's grace to work harder than all the other apostles. And the Psalmist reminds us, "Though the Lord is high, God regards the lowly; but the haughty God perceives from far away" and affirms of God, "On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul."

Let's not be afraid of our unworthiness, our weaknesses, sins, deficits, uncertainties, or limitations. Let's not be afraid because of the small size of our congregation, our small conflicts, our wanderings in the wilderness, our liturgies, our committee meetings. Jesus says to us as he did the fishermen he guided to the catch of their lives, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." So, "when they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him." Essentially, Jesus is telling us, calling us, to "Go fish! Doesn't matter the quality of your experience or your nets or your boats, because I will show you where to toss the nets, how to welcome the people, when to proclaim the year of God's favor.

To the beloved member who e-mailed the question, "Where is Virginia Highland Church headed?" I have one last story. And it has to do with our upcoming theme for Lent, "Come to Life." Coming to life as a congregation requires a gestation process, a patient growing of a vision and of a community. To symbolize this, a butterfly will serve as our symbol for the season of Lent as we consider what cocoons we need to shed, what safety zones, what closets, what feelings of inadequacy or unworthiness.

The story is told by the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis in his novel, *Zorba the Greek*:

“I remembered one morning when I discovered a cocoon in the bark of a tree, just as the butterfly was making a hole in its case and preparing to come out. I waited a while, but it was too long appearing and I was impatient. I bent over it and breathed on it to warm it. I warmed it as quickly as I could and the miracle began to happen before my eyes, faster than life. The case opened, the butterfly started slowly crawling out and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded back and crumpled; the wretched butterfly tried with its whole trembling body to unfold them. Bending over it, I tried to help it with my breath. In vain. It needed to be hatched out patiently and the unfolding of the wings should be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear, all crumpled, before its time. It struggled desperately, and a few seconds later, died in the palm of my hand.

“That little body is, I do believe, the greatest weight I have on my conscience. For I realize today that it is a mortal sin to violate the great [rhythms] of nature. We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm.”

The storyteller concludes, “Ah, if only the little butterfly could always flutter before me to show me the way.” (Nikos Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952] p 120-121.)