

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

If you are a professional fisherman, I'm sure that, over time, you get a sense for how to be successful at it. Of course, nothing is guaranteed, but you learn things—like when is the best time to catch fish, when to not even bother going out, when to spend time washing and mending nets, etc.

Apparently, fishing in Galilee was best done at night. Again, there was never any guarantee, but Peter and his partners must have known that the odds were better then. After a night of no luck fishing, they moved on to what fishermen do during the daytime—mend and wash the nets and get ready to go at it again the following night.

That Jesus would suggest that they go out during the day must have come across as pure foolishness. But Peter respected Jesus and he was willing to honor his instructions. I doubt that Peter was expecting much of anything to happen.

So, when the lowered nets actually had fish in them, and not only that, but more fish than Peter could manage, that was a sure sign to Peter that he was dealing with more than just a teacher. The experience was uncanny. It couldn't be explained away. It so captured Peter's attention that he asked Jesus to go away.

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Peter was so confronted with his own sinfulness in that moment that he felt unworthy to be in Jesus' presence. For him it seemed better that Jesus not have to deal with a person like him.

The miraculous catch of fish is really only the first step in what Jesus ultimately has in mind, though. It's really not about the fish at all. It's about Jesus wanting to catch Peter, and going fishing with him seemed like the best way to go about it. Jesus gives Peter an idea of what lies in store for him if he accepts Jesus' invitation to follow him.

The initial reaction is to be afraid. Following Jesus will mean giving up control and being confronted with a future that lies beyond what Peter can even imagine. It will also mean having to come to terms with the reality of his own sinfulness and where that fits in with the call to discipleship.

It's interesting, I think, that when Peter tells Jesus to go away because he is a sinful man, Jesus doesn't even pay attention to him. Peter's sinfulness does not seem to matter that much to Jesus—at least not so much that it would disqualify him for the mission Jesus has in store for him.

He is focused on what Peter will be able to do if he

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follows him, sins and all. Peter will be catching people, winning them over for the sake of the kingdom of God.

We all have the experience of being good at something. We all are learning from experience about what works in life and what doesn't. And yet, we can't let that become a trap, or something that holds us back. Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves, especially the part about what we are capable of. He's not willing to lose sight of that, even in the face of our sinfulness which has, at least up to this point, kept us from becoming all God meant for us to be.

The great thing about Peter in all the Gospel stories is that he shows us what God can do with ordinary people, people who have their gifts as well as their faults and failings. If we are honest with ourselves we will be willing to recognize that they have not always put our gifts to good use.

There could be any number of reasons for that. One is to become so focused on our sinfulness that we disqualify ourselves from any kind of participation in the Christian mission. That can actually be just another form of self-centeredness.

Why not leave it to Jesus to determine whether we are

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totally ruined or not. If we leave it up to him, there's an excellent chance that he will find a way for us to participate. He may even surprise us!

Jesus did not respond to Peter's request that he leave him alone, and he will not do that to us, either. Better for us if we simply listen to what he tells us, not letting our sins hold us back, but trusting that the Lord will sort all that out if we give him a chance.

What Jesus told Peter would happen—that he would become a “fisher of men”—is what did happen, in spite of the fact that Peter made other mistakes later on and his sinfulness was all too apparent.

Jesus never gave up on him, but continued to lead him forward. We can take courage in that, regardless of whatever mess we might be in at the moment. God has no intention of abandoning us, but will continue to call us into an abundant life of service to his people.

All we have to do is to say “yes.”