

“Ordinary People”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade
The Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 7, 2010
Scripture: Luke 5:1-11

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *O Lord, as we gather this day, let the journey of wonder begin. Let your Word be read, your love be sung, your story be heard, your love be felt, and your presence be sensed. Let us feel your presence in this place. Amen.*

I recently heard about a man who took great pride in being a former Navy Seal. And why not? This is an elite group. It is the aspiration of many young men with whom I have spoken. But not everyone has what it takes. It takes a special sailor to qualify as a Navy Seal.

This man tells about sharing his military exploits with his grandson's kindergarten class. This former Seal regaled the children with his war stories. After he finished, hands shot up into the air all over the classroom. The kids were eager to ask questions. “So,” asked one little girl, “can you balance a ball on the end of your nose?”

Life has a way of humbling us, doesn't it? We think we are impressing people, and all they want is to see us balance a ball on the end of our nose.

Both of our scripture readings this morning have something in common. Each of them presents a man who was humbled.

In the year King Uzziah died, the prophet Isaiah had a vision. Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up. And the hem of God's robe filled the temple. Hovering around the Lord, Isaiah saw mighty seraphim; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And Isaiah said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” And what was Isaiah's initial response to this magnificent vision: “Woe is me! I am lost...” Isaiah was humbled in the presence of God.

Then, we turn to the Gospel of Luke and read what Simon Peter said. Now here is an unlikely candidate to exhibit – don't you think? Jesus is teaching beside the lake of Gennesaret; the crowd is pressing in on him. He sees two boats on shore. The fishermen are washing their nets. Jesus gets into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down our nets for a catch,” he says. Simon Peter answers, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet, if you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they did this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats – and the boats were so full that they began to sink.

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

Do you see or hear anything in common here? Two great heroes of the Bible – men whom we have come to respect and admire – both of whom who are humbled in the presence of the living God.

This peculiar story in Luke's gospel is a turning point in Jesus' ministry. Crowds have followed wherever he has gone. He has discussed whatever was on their minds, and listened carefully – not only to what they said, but also – to what was behind their questions and concerns. Even so, there are those – Simon Peter included – who think that what Jesus is asking of them is unreasonable. They think that they know

better.

So, what do you think? Are we any different? If you ask me, each of us assumes that we have the best understanding our own situation. God tells us to invite others to be a part of the church, but we know people who do not want to have anything to do with the church. We are certain that they are not interested in God or Jesus or anything spiritual. There is no sense alienating them by raising subjects about which they do not care, right? What point could there be in offering something they probably do not want? There is a fine line, we think, between fishing and standing on the bank looking foolish.

But...you know what happens? We are so afraid of looking foolish that we never fish. “Push out into the deep and let down your nets,” Jesus says. And we think we know that nothing will happen.

Yet, just for a moment, let's think that maybe Jesus is right. Maybe there are people you know who would respond if you showed them God's love. Some people hide their emptiness so well that you have to look carefully to see that they are hurting. Maybe you have a friend at work or at school who longs for something more – who wants something different – who wishes for a family – who desires a sense of purpose – who needs God and is waiting for someone to show them the way.

Peter has seen God working in Jesus and does not want God working on him. Peter trusts himself and no one else, but now – suddenly – he has met someone whose instincts are better than his. Jesus knows more than Peter even in the area in which Peter thought he was an expert.

Whenever we meet someone who is the best at something, we are more likely to see the worst in ourselves. You think you are a good chess player and then you play a master and suddenly you are aware that you are never going to be Bobbie Fisher. You think you are a pretty

fair basketball player, and then, you find yourself on the same court with a player who is playing about a foot higher off the ground that you have ever been. You think that you are, relatively speaking, unselfish. Then you meet someone who is truly dedicated to caring for others and you begin to see the mixed motives in your own life.

These two people – Isaiah and Peter – both of whom we recognize as heroes of the faith – were ordinary people who were humbled in the presence of the living God. As much of an important theme humility is, we don't really have a clear understanding of what it is and what it is not.

While we often make the mistake of thinking that they are the same thing, humility is not the same thing as low self-esteem. The person with eyes downcast, shrinking in the corner – someone whom everyone else walks all over – is not a humble Christian. God wants us to have a healthy respect for ourselves, just as we have a healthy respect for others. We are not to esteem ourselves more highly than others, but we are not to esteem ourselves too lowly either. Neither extreme is healthy. And neither extreme is very helpful to the work of God.

Humility has to do with how we view ourselves in our relation to God. Simon Peter was no shrinking violet. Neither was Isaiah. These were men who changed our world, but before they could be used by God, they needed to know who they were in relation to God. They were both men with talent and the ability to influence others, but basically they were just ordinary people. There was a part of them, to be sure, which put their trust in themselves. It was only when they stood in the presence of God that they understood that they were not masters of their universe – that they were but role players – tools in the hand of Almighty God. And it was when they understood that about themselves that they became effective instruments of the Divine

Will.

Author Philip Yancey once made a list of the people who have most influenced him. After studying the list for a time, he realized that the trait which all the people on his list had in common was humility. While each of the people on his list excelled in school, won awards, and had absolutely no reason to doubt their gifts and talents, each of them gave God the credit for their natural gifts and then used those gifts in God's service.

Two of the people on Yancey's list were Dr. Paul Brand and Henri Nouwen. Dr. Brand was a successful, gifted physician who volunteered in India as the first orthopedic surgeon to work with leprosy patients. And Henri Nouwen was a much loved and respected professor at prestigious schools like Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard, who ended up devoting his life to mentally handicapped in institutions in France and Toronto. Both of these men had every reason to be aware of their own worth and abilities, and yet each of them, because of their relationship with God, chose to serve the least and the lowest.

My friends, the people most gifted and successful at sharing God's grace and goodness are ordinary people – people who give God the thanks for the gifts they have and who choose to use those gifts in God's service. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

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