

Saint Joseph Parish, San Mateo CA
Sermon of Trinity V
July 9, 2023
Father Herb Plimpton
Luke 5:1-11

This past week, our Nation celebrated its independence. As you together listen, some of our friends are exercising their individual freedom gossiping over Sunday brunch. Some family members are just teeing off on the third hole. You are here. You are exercising your freedom by a different way of living. Your celebration of freedom is to worship and serve the Lord.

Luke's gospel tells the story of the call of the first disciples. At the edge of the lake, Jesus had His net full of people who so pressed in upon Him to hear the Word that He began to make disciples. These stalwart, skilled and dedicated fisherman had a steady way of life, a familiar way of living day in and day out until.. they were in Jesus presence. His encounter and His call led them to a different way of living..in an instant. Jesus set fire to their hearts.

Luke says they soon became witnesses to the Sermon on the Plain, to the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, to the life to come as they climbed up a tall mountain to see Jesus transfigured. With the fire Jesus had started in them, they mended not nets but cripples, they lifted not nets, but the downcast , they fed not their immediate families but those hungry for the Word of life.

Granted, these first disciples were in the prime of life-vigorous, with memories intact, and bodies willing. In this new freedom, they were fully engaged with Jesus, but often got just part of His message, lost their courage, even turned on Him... while warming their hands by another fire. In their service of the Lord and people whose lives He lifted up, they, like Peter in particular, were also astonished that they, like we ourselves, are free to fail Him with no loss of love. To this preacher, that kind of freedom in Jesus' service, to be forgiven, though not free from one's inevitable sinning, to be given the gift of eternal life though undeserving, makes His new way of living irresistible. The disciple's witness to that kind of living

brought in a whole lot of “fish” in the first decades surrounding Jesus’ ministry.

Despite these early successes, the synagogues quickly severed contact with the sapling church, and the Roman Empire began an active, though sporadic, persecution. There had to be another way for the church to grow and spread her branches, and the answer would come through personal witness.

Christians stood out in ancient culture for the distinctive ways they lived their lives. An anonymous disciple writing to a pagan named Diognetus speaks of this difference not as one of outward culture, but a different way of living, marked by moral freedom and self-sacrificing love. He or she writes:

“Every foreign land to them is as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all; they beget children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on

earth, but they are citizens of heaven, They obey the prescribed laws, and at there same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all.”

Such a way of living with a different understanding of true freedom was noticed by the surrounding pagans, and they wondered about it even if they tiptoed into the lake of Christian liberty, got their toes wet, and drew back. What seemed to capture the pagans’ attention most was the way Christian courage glowed in the dark face of death. Christians were not only willing to die for their faith through persecution, but also to embrace the risk of disease to care for the sick—even those who were often abandoned by their families. They cared for the poor, Christian and pagan alike, and treated women, children and slaves with greater dignity, including recovering abandoned newborns. Christians clearly believed in something..namely Someone..more powerful than any myth or philosophy and proved their faith through the actions Jesus moved them to do.

Bringing people to Jesus, witnessing to His power to transform lives, began with relationships: family connections, neighbors, and colleagues-even enemies... The common vein of sap in the trunk of the growing tree of the church seems to have been friendship. There was, as far as church historians know, no talk of evangelistic methods or institutional programs in the underground church..it seems that Christians converted the world simply by befriending their next door neighbors and persevering in friendship. The glow of Jesus in their hearts kept that little fire of neighborly love going.

A church historian named Michael Green in his book on how early church evangelized says that her growth was in reality accomplished by means of "informal missionaries", Christians who lived skillfully, "engaging people in a natural and enthusiastic way in homes, shop entrances, on walks, and around market stalls." Feeling Jesus' fire burning in their hearts, they meant to spread the embers of true and lasting joy to others..to the limits of their ability.

"To the limits of their ability".. Beloved, our physical abilities are not like those of those first fisherman whose way of living called for strong backs hauling in treasures of fish, whose calloused but nimble fingers could mend countless tears in their nets, whose constant walking behind the peripatetic Jesus drained them for miles and miles, whose constitutions could withstand fishing throughout the night..night after night.

Sooner or later, perhaps, Lindsay's back-breaking life of nursing in OB-Gyn will have turned to a new way of living.. counseling and comforting women in dire straits. Sooner or later, perhaps, Lawrence's devoted life of teaching math will turn even more than it has in discussion group to asking even deeper faith questions and to enlightening pagans in Pacifica. Sooner or later, perhaps, Ginger's magic-making and feeding us in our kitchen will transform into simply holding a spoon for a lonely hospice patient.

My point is, we may not have the raging fire that burned in Peter when he preached a sermon and

converted thousands, nor the fire that burned in the disciples' hearts as they walked with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. But you glow..I can see it..and a glow belies a fire that can ignite when the Spirit blows.

So, then, we are silver and gray disciples on the outside..Or, to employ the Psalmist's metaphor, while we may look like older trees, we are still green within, still full of sap..and the Lord has need of us in seeding new trees. That need being said, we are free to do.. as God pleases. Happy belated Fourth of July.