

“The Weirdness of Faith”

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Reading: Matthew 4.12-23

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.’

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

1 Corinthians 1.10-18

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

The message of Christ on the cross makes perfect sense, Paul says. Really? Perhaps we'll just put that one on the skyhook for a minute.

The story that Francisco read, about Jesus at the side of the sea, calling the fishermen to follow, is one of the ones I would put on my list for our new Sunday school program. Such a lovely scene, water and sunshine, gulls crying, pong of seaweed and fish. We can imagine the boats bumping gently against a jetty, or grinding on the pebbles. Nets drying on the beach, while strong hands examine them for weak spots and gashes. Fish being sorted for sale or home consumption, as these small-scale entrepreneurs make quick calculations about the market. It's a work day, but people are interested in this new preacher. They look up when he speaks. Jesus must have been quite a compelling presence – come with me, he says, and they do.

First one set of brothers and then the next. *And immediately they left their nets*, we read. Right away, says one translation. There, it says he is going to make them haul in people instead of fish. Lots of ways we can explore that image, as Emily showed us – nets, hooks, casting, tickling, bit of bacon with a safety pin on a string?

But it does leave us a little uneasy, as liberal Protestants in downtown Toronto. Evangelism, as such – that is, *hauling them in*, so to speak, isn't quite how we see ourselves. We don't really know how to do it. And we feel guilty about that. Feel like failures as disciples. We can sing the fine old camp song with pleasure and gusto, but we aren't too sure how to go about fishing for people. We feel barriers as big as the language barrier, gaps as wide as the gap of indifference.

Not to make excuses, but there are some interesting reasons for our awkwardness about evangelism. Cultural historian and social theorist James Davison Hunter¹ gives insights on why it may be more difficult now than at other times even to have faith, let alone go out, in Jesus' words, to fish for people. His main observation is that the context for faithfulness has changed dramatically. Not so much the faith itself as the background. It used to be that most people, whether in a majority or a minority cultural group lived a rather insular social life in which one could pretty much take for granted that one's own beliefs and ways of life were valid, even superior. One could be confident. There was no real need ever to have to take seriously the claims of another culture or religion. This was more true for members of the dominant culture, but even minorities could situate themselves with respect to Protestant Christendom, and hold their own with conviction. Christians in North America – garden variety people like the ones who sat in this church – held their beliefs within in what Peter Berger calls a 'plausibility structure' replete with 'language, symbols and social practice all woven into everyday life that underline[d] and buttress[ed] those beliefs.'² If you imagine your way back a few generations, with Bible reading in school, Lord's prayer on civic occasions, Sunday shopping laws, you can see that faith itself simply fit right in – it just wasn't that hard to find it believable.

¹ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World* (London: Oxford University Press, 2010).

² *Ibid.*, 202.

By contrast, we live now in a world that is both secular and genuinely pluralist, in which religious faith is problematized. All beliefs and ways of living are contestable. The intensity of public discussion after the funeral of police Sergeant Ryan Russell this week amply demonstrates that. Nothing is taken for granted, because we are so diverse in attitude and politics as well as nationality, race, orientation, and a host of other factors. There is a constant requirement to define the shared core. The wonderful gifts of diversity come with that added challenge.

When it comes to religion, you have to be able to make a choice and to explain yourself. As Hunter puts it,

Belief is certainly possible, but it is necessarily different. The confidence borne from beliefs that are taken for granted typically gives way to belief plagued by ambivalence and uncertainty. The uncertainty is not a matter of insufficient will or deficient commitment, but a natural social psychological reaction to weakened plausibility structures.³

So perhaps we shouldn't really be surprised by our own diffidence about evangelism. Christianity is a harder case to make now than it used to be, even to yourself. In this late modern setting, faith itself is somewhat weird. It is unusual and a little strange to get yourself to church on a Sunday morning, in order to sing hymns of praise and shake hands with people and join voices and hearts in prayer. It makes you a bit of an odd duck.

So, if we are to share this faith, to *haul them in*, how should we proceed? We can start by becoming articulate about what we have found here, able to say what it is about Christian faith that makes sense to us. We probably need to drill down and discover what we do believe, and figure out the links between our picture of God and our sense of justice, between the stories of Jesus and the lives we live day to day. We need to work it out carefully, and speak plainly.

But this is about more than what we believe – it is about what we love. In the weirdness of our faith, what is it we love? What is it that draws us? The glory of it, the friendliness of it, the quiet beauty of it, the compassion and justice of it? You? What is

³ Ibid., 203.

it that is compelling about that mystery man from Nazareth, even twenty centuries later?

You may have seen this quote from Donald Miller in the front of the bulletin.

I never liked jazz music because jazz music doesn't resolve. But I was outside the Baghdad Theater in Portland one night when I saw a man playing the saxophone. I stood there for fifteen minutes and he never opened his eyes.

After that I liked jazz music.

*Sometimes you have to watch somebody love something before you can love it yourself. It's as if they are showing you the way.*⁴

That is the kind of fishing we are supposed to be doing. Not inviting people to join a club, but pointing to the mysterious goodness that we have put our trust in. As Miller goes on to say, like jazz, God doesn't resolve. The more we seek what we love, the more the mystery will draw us in. That is partly why this initiative of Emily's and CDCL (Christian Development and Community Life) to identify favourite Bible stories is important – not just to figure out the Sunday school curriculum, but to recall and activate within ourselves those things about this weird faith that we love.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he was addressing a community not unlike the one we live in – pluralist, fractured, contentious. The Christians had no special prominence, and in fact their faith and practices were considered somewhat weird. In that vulnerable position, they fell to arguing among themselves. Just twenty years after Jesus' death, they were already so far from the clarity of that morning on the beach. Paul tells them, and us, not to become embroiled in turf skirmishes and rhetorical battles, but to focus on the powerful action at the centre. At the centre of it all, Jesus said, follow me. Perhaps it does make perfect sense. Amen.

⁴ Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), ix.