

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

Peter and his companions had done their best. They had fished all night long and caught nothing; all of their time and effort had been for nothing. They were tired as they washed their nets. Peter is not the only worker who has, in the words of Peter, “*worked hard all night.*” Many people can identify with this experience of Peter. Sometimes we have worked hard all day-- and then our efforts still keeps us up at night. We can hear in Peter’s voice the fatigue, the frustration, the failure.

There are times in our lives when we can say what Peter expresses in today’s gospel: “*We have caught nothing.*” We may have struggled to keep a relationship together, only to have it crumble; or taught our children the faith, only to have them give it up when they left the house; one might have studied for an exam, yet not gotten the desired results; or tried one’s best to be a good parent, only to discover a child going down the wrong path; or come to the end of our hard-working lives to find ourselves limited by physical or financial woes. What does this gospel say to all those who have worked hard but feel frustrated?

As we read the gospel, it is clear that Peter has not yet had the time or the leisure to listen to Jesus preach on some hillside or local synagogue. He has had important things to do: he’s got a family to feed and a business to run. So, since Peter could not go to Jesus, Jesus goes to him. The gospel tells us that the crowd is eager to hear the word of God, and Jesus looks around for a pulpit. The text tells us, “*He saw two boats at the shore.*” The purpose of hearing the word is to be “caught” by it, to have it illumine our mind and inspire our will to such an extent that it changes our thinking and our acting.

But in order for this to happen, two encounters are necessary. A first encounter acquaints the hearers with the teaching and prepares the way for further exploration. Then, a second encounter brings about a greater, deeper understanding of what the teaching means. The crowds who stay on shore become acquainted with the teaching, but they remain in the first encounter: they remain basically unmoved. Simon, James, John, and the other fishermen who follow Jesus’

instructions enter the second encounter and realize the truth of the teaching of Jesus in a life-changing way.

When Jesus finished speaking the word, it is time for Simon Peter and the others to experience what they have heard. It is one thing for Jesus to teach—it is quite another thing for hearers to grasp it so it becomes their own. Jesus gives simple directions for the disciples which are very symbolic. Simon Peter is instructed to put out into deep water, and then let down the nets for a catch. Symbolically, Jesus is inviting Peter to go deep inside himself, and wait to receive what he is looking for. But Simon Peter and the others have never had success with these directions. They have tried, but only experienced the darkness of night and caught nothing. Symbolically, they have not yet seen the “light”, and are experiencing a spiritual “emptiness” in their lives.

Notice that Simon Peter calls Jesus “master”. A master, by definition, has more knowledge than a disciple. So Simon will do what Jesus says, even though he does not think it will work. This is true of every student or disciple. They obey the master until, through their own experience, they discover what the master knows. Simon on the outside is obedient—but you can tell on the inside he is doubtful.

The disciples reluctantly followed the instructions of Jesus... and God overwhelms them! The nets are filled to the breaking point and the boats are filled to the sinking point. Since this was not their usual experience, Simon and the others are amazed and bewildered. Following Jesus’ instruction leads to abundance and fullness. If people opens themselves to God, God responds.

Simon’s response reflects the attitude of all who experience the immensity of God. The fullness and abundance of God’s reality dwarfs him. Simon experiences his own smallness and inadequacy. He is not worthy of what he has encountered. The greatness of the Creator and the smallness of the creature always go hand in hand. Simon is astonished and significantly paralyzed by what he has experienced.

But Jesus invited Simon to react differently. Jesus instructs Simon Peter not to be afraid. Instead, he is to use what he has experienced to bring others to the same knowledge. As Jesus has taught him, so is he is to catch others. The gospel today is not about fishing or about fear—it is about trust. Jesus is saying to Peter: “Hoe far are you prepared to trust me?” It was a turning

point in the life of Peter. What started out as a bad day ended in a new beginning, a new direction.

The season of Lent starts in just ten days. Lent is the time available for us to ponder our lives more deeply, and to realize the new life God is calling us to. There will be a number of opportunities to listen to God through special prayers and liturgies this Lent. We who are standing on the shore might want to listen to the call of the Lord to go out into the deep... especially if we are experiencing in our lives a time of frustration, or fatigue, or even failure. Like Peter, we are called to a deeper trust in God—and what a surprise God has in store for those who trust in his word!