

The Rev. Ryan Fischer  
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany  
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Lectionary Year C: Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

Every now and then, clergy get asked questions like, "Why did you go into the ministry?" or "What made you decide to become a priest?" If I were to offer an estimate of how many times I get asked this question in the course of a year, I'd say it still happens at least twice. The question was asked much more frequently when I was in seminary, for all kinds of reasons, and in my first years of ministry, as well. I assume that, as a rookie, I attracted that question because young clergypersons are more of a novelty. After all, shouldn't a twenty-something guy be doing something a little more "fun" or "hip"?

Could you ever see me selling mountain bikes and skateboards? Not even then!

The story of how one is called to the ministry is usually pretty complicated -- full of twists, turns, questions, and delays. And then we read from the Scriptures the accounts of Jesus calling the disciples; in today's Gospel reading, Jesus steps into Simon Peter's boat, preaches to the crowd gathered on the shore, and then when he's done orders him to go fishing. By the end of the text, the expedition is over and Simon Peter (along with James and John) is ready to go follow Jesus. Not many twists, turns, questions, or delays there!

But, similar to Simon Peter, clergy generally have some sort of "call story" that tells how and why they became a priest or minister. I wonder, though, why laypersons often don't have a similar story about why they are Christians; could it be that there's a lingering assumption that this is a bit too "evangelical" and that clergy are the only real evangelists? I suspect that this is, indeed, the case.

Of course, in our Gospel text, we notice that the disciples are called in a direct encounter with Jesus -- one that is so overwhelming that it prompts Simon Peter to fall down at Jesus' knees and exclaim, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8b). So, for us, what might constitute a direct (and possibly overwhelming) encounter with Jesus? As disciples ourselves, it would seem that we ought to have something like that in our "call stories."

We do, in fact, have direct encounters with Jesus, especially here in church. Think about how we process into the midst of the congregation to read the Gospel. You encounter Jesus there directly as his words are read by a priest or deacon. Think, too, of how you receive Jesus in the Eucharist -- as you come forward and extend your hands, you have a direct encounter with Jesus in his Body and Blood. And both the Word and the Sacrament call you from Jesus himself to do as the first disciples did. Jesus says to us, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people" (Luke 5:10b).

For generations of us who grew up singing "I will make you fishers of men" in Sunday School, this image may reach back decades to some of our earliest recollections of church. Personally, I remember thinking the song was kind of neat because I heard my name in it! But when Jesus says, "You will be catching people," he's pointing to something much greater than an earworm from a Sunday School songbook. This is, indeed, the call to get people on board with Jesus, with some deft use of imagery related to the vocation from which the first disciples came.

With all of our various vocations, how might Jesus call us? If fishermen are to "catch people," what is a mechanic, factory worker, accountant, attorney, teacher, banker, business owner, engineer, chef, or physician supposed to do? Dropping everything and doing something completely different probably isn't an option here, but answering Jesus' call still is.

There's a quote attributed to the sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther, and it goes something like this: "A Christian shoemaker does not make shoes with crosses on them; a Christian shoemaker makes good shoes." For the majority of us, being a disciple of Jesus doesn't require us to quit our day jobs; instead, it calls us to do our day jobs in such a way that they honor Jesus with honesty and integrity. And we pray that we may "catch" some people simply by doing that!

Ordained persons -- such as bishops, priests, and deacons -- are often seen as participating more directly in Jesus' call to disci-

planship. Yes, we clergy give a significant portion of our lives over to study, formation, and priestly ministry, but we need to remember that we equip people like you to do a lot of things that clergy can't do on their own. Speaking personally, I need some employees and volunteers to make everything run smoothly around here, lest I find myself burning out awfully fast! Sure, I might "catch" some people simply by virtue of my vocation, but there are more of you than there is of me, so, chances are, your "catch" is going to be greater.

And that's just fine...

Whether clergy or lay, it needs to be noted, as well, that Jesus came to us in one way or another to call us to where we are now. Getting back to the question that has often been raised to me -- "Why did you go into the ministry?" -- my answer would point to a constellation of events, encounters, and catalysts that were, I believe, Jesus coming to me -- a few elements of which really stand out. Back in the spring of 1991, I was finishing my junior year at a small, Lutheran school in Fargo, North Dakota, and, being the eager future public servant I was, I ran for student body president. I remember, when Election Day finally came, giving one last campaign speech among my challengers (many of whom were my friends) and waiting anxiously for the election results. ("Anxiously" would be putting it gently...I remember feeling as if my heart could've jumped out of my chest!) As it turned out, I lost the election by a handful of votes, but a consolation prize of

sorts awaited me.

At this little Lutheran school, we had daily chapel services and other religious activities, and so my consolation prize was being appointed Student Chaplain. It was something I thoroughly enjoyed doing, and, later on in my senior year, I decided that I wanted to pursue ordained ministry in the church. Sure, I thought about other careers along the way before I got to seminary, but, as you can tell, I decided not to pursue them.

I realize you might conclude that a failure to get elected to office led me here, and so I ask that you look at the flip side of the story. Think of those who, like Jesus, identified me to serve the church -- as a Student Chaplain at Oak Grove Lutheran High School and eventually as an ordained minister. Think of the pastors and teachers who inspired me to follow in their footsteps, as well as the little ditties from the Sunday School songbook that stick with me to this day. These would be the constellation of events, encounters, and catalysts that brought me to where I am today. My response to Jesus' call, though, is but one of many, and now I urge you to consider yours.

You don't have to be a priest to do most of what I am doing, but Jesus still says to you, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." You have footsteps to follow in and a Lord who calls you, and maybe you can identify pastors and teachers who have inspired and continue to inspire you to witness to God's love. Know, too, that this congregation has numerous ways to

match your gifts to specific ministries; think of this as another way in which you encounter Jesus through his many ways you can serve him. Jesus now awaits your response...a response perhaps echoing that of the prophet Isaiah: "Here am I; send me!" (6:8c).

You have before you the call, but it is one with many blessings to both you and the lives that you will touch. Rooted in this call is the sharing of God's unconditional love, which is revealed in God's mighty acts throughout history and most perfectly in the gift of his Son Jesus Christ, who "caught" people so they might more fully and truly experience the love of his heavenly Father. And should anyone ask you why you so believe, tell that person it's because God loves you and you want others to know that they're loved, too.

Not a bad "catch," at all!

Amen.