

PROMISES, PERILS AND POSSIBILITIES

Luke 5: 1-11

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Do you remember that insightful novel, *Ordinary People*—and its equally enduring movie/counterpart directed by Robert Redford and starring Mary Tyler Moore? Most of the movie was shot in and around Chicago and its northern suburbs because it concerns the death by drowning of a young man in Lake Michigan. There is a scene in which Calvin, the father, recalls the day he and his wife, Beth, buried their son, Buck, who drowned just before his senior year in high school. They had been a proper, decent, good family, and they continue to try to be that even through their continuing, unresolved pain and grief.

But Calvin cannot shake the memory that on the day of Buck's funeral when they were burying a vivid part of themselves, Beth had insisted that he change his blue shirt for a white one, his brown shoes for black. As he remembers that scene, his first feeling is anger. Then he breaks through, the light comes on as he begins to come to some understanding of Beth, even compassion for her. He understands her need for order, for things to be proper and decent, and the revelation that comes through the memory of that funeral finally enables him to tell their second son how deeply he loves him.

Our similar struggle over conventional behavior is so much a part of our lives that we sometimes repress the agonies that lie just beneath the surface of our lives. "Repression is to humans," said William Sloan Coffin, "what instinct is to other animals." I was brought up in what I call the "Dorcas and Martha School of Christian Education." Dorcas and Martha were my grandmothers, both of them endowed with biblical names, and although they were temperamentally two very different people, they held in common a realized belief system: to be a Christian means doing your duty, keeping clean, being decent with everyone, watching your tongue and, of course, going to church every Sunday.

But if you had to choose, my grandmothers believed, between being courageous for your faith and simply being a good parent or child, citizen or neighbor, then probably you had better play it safe and do the decent thing. That just about summed up much of the faith of Dorcas Heritage Petty and Martha Sue Winkler of DeWitt, Arkansas, who no doubt cottoned to James 1:22: "Be ye doers of the Word and not hearers only."

When Jesus encounters fishermen who had an unfruitful night on their fishing expedition and who are now cleaning their nets before putting them away, he upsets the order of their lives. They come face to face with their limits and Jesus pushes them even further into the unknown. Jesus initiates the relationship by asking a small favor, asking the men to push one of the boats away from the beach. Then two miracles happen. After he taught the crowds, Jesus told Simon to "put out into the water and let down your nets for a catch. Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets'" (Luke 5: 3b-5).

The first miracle occurs, an astonishing event: “they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break” (v. 6). The miracle brings Peter to his knees in repentance, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” (v. 8). Take note: Peter’s repentance is the crux of the story. In a modern mainline Protestant church like ours, we don’t like to talk about either miracles or repentance. Many of us have forgotten the spiritual practice of repentance, yet like Peter we cannot follow Jesus until we recognize our sinfulness and our need for repentance.

Luther said that our pride, our willfulness is like an onion. In the act of repentance, we peel away a layer, then another, then another layer—until we reach the core of the onion, our pride. Then—we are so proud that we have peeled away the layers of our pride that in our self-righteousness we have to start all over again.

Jesus is gentle with us, but He is always calling us, always showing us small miracles that can lead to the greater miracle: the call to follow Him.

Let me tell you about my maternal grandfather, the Reverend Zeno Lincoln Petty. He was a tall, white-haired, austere-looking man who, on Sundays when he went to church and on Saturdays when he went to the town square in DeWitt, Arkansas, wore a gray suit with a high-necked white collar, a gray tie with a fake pearl embedded in it just below the knot. He stood ramrod straight at all times and his blue eyes could sparkle with humor and compassion one moment and judgment and disdain the next.

Papa had run a saloon and bookie joint in Muncie, Indiana, fleecing the Yankees while making a very good living. Then by the grace of God he met a very devout Methodist young woman named Dorcas Heritage and he started going to church, something he had never done before. He was saved in the High Street Methodist Church and subsequently felt called to ordain ministry. All this is recorded in his autobiography, *From Saloon to Pulpit*, of which there remain only three copies in existence, two of which I possess.

Thus, after going to college at Taylor University and completing his seminary education at Garrett Biblical Institute in Evanston, Illinois, the Reverend Petty began his ministry as a local church pastor. However, there was one problem: when God created Papa, God forgot to give him the gift of tact. Any local church pastor must know when to talk and when to listen, when to tell the truth to a parishioner and when to dissimilate a bit. Papa was constitutionally incapable of that. Consequently, he never lasted in any parish for more than eighteen months.

By the time I knew him as my grandfather, he and Dorcas had settled on a rice farm south of DeWitt. But being a preacher, he felt called to go into town every Saturday when in those days all the farmers and merchants and townfolk would gather on the square to shop, gossip and exchange wares. So there the Reverend Petty would stand dressed in his gray suit and tie, Bible in hand, proclaiming as he thumped the Good Book that sinners must repent and turn to God. For him that was the definition of evangelism.

Even long ago in that small town which could be characterized as the buckle on the Bible Belt, Papa’s form of evangelism was a failure. As far as I know, nobody ever stopped long enough to hear Papa

preach on a Saturday night on the square in DeWitt and suddenly fall to his or her knees and give her life to Jesus.

Most of us in University Church were all too familiar with that kind of fundamentalism and evangelicalism that gripped us in our youth and young adulthood. We rejected it. We came to this congregation for a number of reasons and one among them is because of its liberal theology and practice of the faith. But we pay a price for our liberalism. It too easily becomes a kind of watered-down faith as well as a faith that makes no demands of discipleship. "Come to worship when you can. Give a little money to the church when you can." (Notice that we don't talk about stewardship in terms of giving money to God through the church, and we certainly never use that dirty, five-letter word, "tithing.") "Sin? No, we don't like to use that word either."

Today's New York Times Book Review prints an assessment of Christopher Lasch's 1978 book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, which appeared during a time of inflation and recession, oil shortages, soaring crime rates and faltering cities. The seventies were marked by a shift from public to private concerns, from antiwar protests and civil rights marches to Transcendental Meditation, macrobiotic diets, jogging, and other vehicles of "self-actualization."

President Jimmy Carter recognized the disillusionment of his fellow citizens and sought, however feebly, to reawaken the communal spirit of America. With Lasch advising him, he delivered what has become known as the "malaise speech" (although he never used that word) in 1979. That speech, writes Lee Siegel, was the last fully honest message that a president has delivered to the American people, and its diagnosis of our spiritual affliction could not have been more accurate:

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.

It was a speech Americans did not want to hear, and Ronald Reagan came along to celebrate our self-interest, our narcissism as a virtue.

For Jesus in this encounter with Simon Peter evangelism involves an invitation to break from the predictable and routine. It is an invitation to venture into new ground or new depths. In the case of Simon, as for us twenty-first century Christians faced with such a command, there is the realization that the most profound and significant experiences of God and life are not to be found in the safe ways and places. Simon obeys the instruction and immediately knows that he is standing in the presence of Someone who mediates the immediacy of the divine presence. This profound religious experience has put his life under a new spotlight and set in motion a path toward transformation. Simon becomes aware of his unworthiness in the presence of the Divine and so he is compelled to implore Jesus, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (v.8).

Rather than writing him off, Jesus now reveals to Simon the potential that resides in him through participation in the work of God, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people" (v. 10).

Eduard Schweizer reminds us that faith "does not come as assent to statements previously preached, but as trust in Jesus' call to trust contrary to all dictates of reason." Similarly, Rowan Williams has said that to say we believe in Jesus is the equivalent of saying that we have confidence in Jesus above all things. Jesus is where we belong, the One to whom we belong. To know ourselves as those who belong to Jesus before we belong to anyone or anything else is the beginning of a right understanding of discipleship.

There is another incontrovertible truth that this story brings home. So often the cost of discipleship does not come off the top. It is demanded of us after we have given everything that we can give. Jesus did not show up on the shore of Lake Gennesaret after a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast. He came to find these fisher people at the end of a long working night, after backbreaking labor, and he told them to keep on working.

He does the same thing to us.

A book I return to from time to time is entitled *A History of Reading* by Alberto Manguel. It's a splendid study of books, of people who read books and motifs of reading. One of my favorite characters in the history of reading is Abdul Kassem Ismael, Grand Vizier of Persia in the tenth century, who "in order not to part with his collection of 117,000 volumes when traveling, had them carried by a caravan of four hundred camels trained to walk in alphabetical order."

Like that Grand Vizier, I want all my books near me at all times. Although I don't have them in alphabetical order and I don't like camels, still I know where each book is located. When I first started building my library when I was in junior high school, one of the first books I purchased was an anthology, *Christ in Poetry*. In it is an anonymous poem entitled "Still Thou Art Question":

We place thy sacred name upon our brows;
Our cycles from thy natal day we score:
Yet, spite of all our songs and all our vows,
We thirst and ever thirst to know thee more.

For Thou art Mystery and Question still;
Even when we see Thee lifted as a sign
Drawing everyone unto that hapless hill
With the resistless power of Love Divine.

Still Thou art Question—while rings in our ears

Thine outcry to a world discord-beset:

Have I been with thee all these many years,

O world—doest thou not know Me even yet?