

7 February, 2010; Epiphany 5C  
Is 6:1-8; Ps 138  
I Cor 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

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A couple years ago, I went to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine to participate in Nightwatch with the people who are now in our Journey to Adulthood class. The kids and I put our stuff in the gym, played some games, and then began to walk to the Cathedral. It took forever. The Cathedral had been damaged in a fire and was still being restored, so the normal way in was blocked. Instead, we walked between gray wooden barriers which formed a long corridor that went on and on and on. Finally, after what felt like ten minutes, we found ourselves standing in the darkened Cathedral, at the crossing, underneath the soaring darkness of the great dome. Our guide told us two things that night: first, that the dome was so high that you could fit the Statue of Liberty into the building. Second, that when we walked past that endless line of gray wooden walls, we had been in the Cathedral itself the whole time.

It was an awesome thing to think of: that people had built, for the glory of God and from their own ambition, a building so large that you could put one of our nation's largest icons inside it. It is perhaps more awe-inspiring still to realize that the mere hem of God's robe would have filled the whole space: dome and nave and chancel and all. No wonder Isaiah cried out when he saw it, "Woe is me! I am lost..." (Is 6:5). He *was* lost -- dwarfed by the Presence of a Reality so large that the mightiest works of humankind could not contain It, a God beside whom we are as nothing. In that one glimpse of God, Isaiah lost his image of himself -- of himself as a good person, a person who tries hard, a decent, above-average human being. And he lost his image of God: of a God who would be satisfied with the offering of the life of a decent, hard-working, above-average human being. In this one encounter, Isaiah saw that his expectations were utterly inadequate: he had underestimated both God and humankind. What God was about was something different.

This is a crucial point: Jesus Christ does not want you to be a good human being! So much of the language of Christianity that we hear around us reduces faithfulness to morality. The great flashpoints of our time, where someone's religious beliefs collide with contemporary culture, all concern the living of the what we consider to be the moral life: homosexuality, militarism, sexual purity, abortion -- these are questions about how a faithful person lives. The underlying assumptions are clear: that God wants us to behave in certain ways which are pleasing to God and to avoid other behaviors, which God calls sinful. The Christian life, then, is a matter of deciding to avoid sin, in much the same way we would avoid eating candy which has fallen onto a dirty street because it might make us sick. The apex of Christian life is to love Jesus enough to avoid sin.

But this is a terrible distortion of the reality of God. No, God doesn't want you to be a sinner, either! I'm not condoning terrible behavior, really! But the truth is that, beside the reality of God, all human goodness is eclipsed: everyone is lost; everyone is reduced in scale to almost nothing. Beside the truth of God's all-generating goodness, the gap between a saint and a sinner is so small that the greatest of saints can barely discern it at all. If the goal of Christian life is to be a friend of Jesus, to be able to stand in God's presence, then human goodness won't get us there at all.

St. Teresa of Avila has written of seven stages (she calls them mansions) of the Christian life. At one point, she says, the soul is so far consumed with desire for Jesus that the thought of sinning is unbearable: he or she will do anything to avoid it. I always find it sobering (and a bit dismaying) that this occurs in the second or third stage! Absolute determination not to offend God deliberately is the beginning of our life in Christ, not the end of it.

When Christ was walking by the sea of Gennesaret, he borrowed Peter's boat and sat in it and taught, so that the crowd would not crush him. And at the end, he told Peter to let down his nets into the deep water, and immediately the nets were so full of fish that that they began to break.

And Peter piled the fish into his boat until it began to sink, and then he called to his partners and filled *their* boat, too, until finally he could stand it no more and cried out: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8) *Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!* It is his Isaiah moment, the one in which he realizes that he is standing in the presence of Mystery and all he can see is his own dust and ashes. *Woe is me. I am a sinful man.* And Christ does not deny it. He does not even reply. He must have heard the change in the way Peter addresses him, from "Master" (or teacher) to "Lord" -- the change which signals a conversion. But all he says is "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." (Luke 5:10) Once Peter stands there in the boat, surrounded by the writhing, heaving, silver-bright fish, straining to breathe, and proclaims his own total inadequacy, then -- and only then-- does Christ call him to begin to be a disciple.

But if virtue is not the central thing in Christian life, what is?

St. Paul points us in the right direction, I think, when he appeals to the Christians in Corinth to abandon their quarrels and focus again on what is true. "For I handed on to you as of first importance," he writes, "what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared [again]." (I Cor 15:3-5) What is of first importance is the death and resurrection of Christ, the new life which spirals out to include you and to include me. "But, Deborah," you will object, "you've just switched the subject! You were talking about what is essential for us, and now you're talking about Jesus!" That's right. It's *not* about us. It's about Jesus.

If we miss this point, our whole life of faith will be mis-aimed. We will be straining ourselves to reach what is merely human, while all along God is inviting us to participate in the things which are divine. God will still love us, but we will not learn to accept that love fully. Ruth Burrows writes, "If we meet people who have overcome bad habits, who live carefully ordered lives materially and spiritually, whom nothing would induce to sin, who love doing penance, spend hours in [prayer], who use their time well, practice works of charity toward their neighbour and are very careful in their speech and dress, would we think them not only admirable but saintly? Aren't we inclined to say 'so and so is a perfect saint'? ...It is because this state seems so good and exemplary, that it is a stumbling block to true holiness. Too often this [condition] in real life is taken to be the summit of the spiritual life...yet it is far from what Christianity is all about."<sup>1</sup> To attain this state is hard but necessary; we have to work and focus long and long to become as good as this! But to remain in this state is to remain, in essence, a Pharisee: a person who loves God so deeply that he is willing to transform his life by obeying the law of God.

What God wants, I think, is to give us a miraculous catch of fish! Do you remember the scene? When Christ tells Peter to put down his nets in the deep water, Simon answers, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." (Luke 5:5) This is the moment of Peter's self-surrender: the one in which he abandons the ways of men and women and embraces the ways of God. It is a remarkable decision: after all, it is Simon, and not Jesus, who is a fisherman. Simon, not Jesus, is the expert here, and he has come up dry. My friend Drew once compared this scene to a seasoned old pro who had been out all night in the cold and wet without catching anything, only to have some hot-shot vacationer pull up in a shiny new boat with an electric fish-finder. And when the catch comes in, the one human means could not find, it is too much: too much for the boats, which begin to sink; too much for the nets, which begin to tear. Too much for you and for me, who are too small to hold the glory of God. It is so much easier to plead our sin than it is to grow big enough to let God in. It is so much easier to cling to human virtue than to accept adoption as children of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Burrows, *The Interior Castle Explored*, p.28. Where I have put "prayer," Burrows writes "recollection": the condition of being centered in God, sometimes while praying, but also while going about our daily responsibilities.

And yet (here's the good news), it is not we who must do the growing, but God. We prepare ourselves like farmers preparing ground to receive the seed. That's where the virtue comes in. We remove the weeds of wrongdoing and wrong-thinking, enrich the soil of our hearts with prayer and study and service, make nice furrows in which we hope God will plant -- God's own self. It is the most absurd claim in the world: that we could be like Christ -- and yet, we are offered the gift of Christ himself. The heart of the thing, beyond good and evil and right and wrong, is to allow God to enlarge our hearts enough to love like Christ. Not to love as good people love, but to love like Christ.

A few years ago, the publication of Mother Theresa's journals revealed that she had spent almost fifty years in a state of spiritual desolation. The revelation shocked most of us, who were accustomed to thinking of her as holy, spirit-led, an intimate of Jesus Christ if ever there was one. And yet, look at her life more closely. For nearly fifty years, she tended the dying of Calcutta. She bathed their sores, held them in her arms, prayed for them when they no longer had words to reach out to God. Her feet were deformed from always taking the worst shoes which had been given to her Order. Her patience was surely tried by the very people who tried to follow her. She had to deal with the media and with visiting celebrities, to fly between palaces and slums without succumbing to the allure of wealth or blasting the callousness of those who held it. In doing all this, she had no awareness of God. And yet, she continued to walk forward in the darkness.

Human goodness could not have done it. Human goodness always wants something for the self, and here there was nothing: not even the consciousness that she was being good. Human goodness would have become embittered, would have turned tail and run. Only the presence of God could possibly explain how Theresa was able to persist in her work. Only the Crucified One, who loved us enough to take up his cross when his friends turned away and his disciples hid and even his God seemed to disappear, could have enabled her to go on. This was the very love of Christ, lived out in her life. It was not beautiful for her. It was not warm and fuzzy. But it *was* God, working in her to do more than she could ever have done alone.

St. Paul writes, "Last of all, as to someone untimely born, [Christ] appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am." (I Cor 15:8-10) St. Paul was wrong. He was *not* the last to see the risen Christ. Christ is appearing to us each day as to people untimely born, in the stranger and in our neighbor and in the people who drive us crazy, visiting us, calling us, asking us to follow him, asking us to become him. Of our own, we cannot do it. But the same grace which transformed Paul is there for us. We do not stand on our own goodness; beside God, that is dust and straw. But we stand in the grace of God, which calls us to wade in further and further, let the nets down deeper and deeper, until we haul in more than we can think to desire or deserve-- until we haul in Christ, whole and shining and seeking to draw breath in you and in me, drawing us into his perfect love.