

Trinity V One Year Series

The readings today build the people of God, sending roots deeply into the good soil of God's Word. They call on us to trust. Elijah is burned out on his career as a prophet. Peter cowers in fear before this preacher who has filled his otherwise empty nets to the bursting with fish. Paul speaks of a proclamation which the world considers foolishness but which God has somehow revealed to him and us to be the very power of God. It doesn't look like it should work, but it does.

Ours is a cynical age. The comics and the commentators alike work off the basis of suspicion and assuming the worst. If we did not join them in this, they would never make any money at it. But they do make money, lots of it. And so we are properly labeled as suspicious and cynical people.

How shall we preach to such people a message of trust? Pointing to divine deeds millennia old will hardly engender such trust. As the old questioner asks: What has he done lately? Like Elijah we will be urged to listen to a small voice, not power, but gentleness. Luther's words on the Gospel lesson are particularly apropos to this generation. If we cannot trust God to care for our bodies, which are right before us, will we really be able to trust him with our eternal blessings?

Collect of the Day

O God, You have prepared for those who love You good things that surpass all understanding. Pour into our hearts such love toward You that we, loving You above all things, may obtain Your promises, which exceed all that we can desire, through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

So what are you expecting from God? This prayer seems to suggest that even our wildest imagination is inadequate for describing what it is that God has in mind for us. He has prepared good things which surpass all understanding. Do we sometimes seriously limit God's ability to bless us? Does that show up in our personal prayers? Does it show up in the fact that most people just don't pray today?

Enlightenment Christianity placed God at a great distance and imagined that while he was still the creator of this world he was not terribly involved. Like some great wind-up toy, the spring had been loaded at creation and God was watching this thing play out. This handily excused him from getting his hands dirty with all the messiness of wars, disease, famine, etc., but it also meant that people did not really expect God to do anything about their pedestrian troubles. Now, to their credit, the Enlightenment thinkers who did that had a good reason. Europe was awash in blood from religious wars which had gripped the continent in the 17th century. They wanted to get God out of the war-making business because a great number of people were dying and many more had suffered serious deprivation.

But I wonder if an unintended side effect of all this is that we don't really expect much of God these days. We have pretty well explained everything through natural causes. When we confess

that God is creator in our creed we imagine that this is an ancient affair, long done, and God is watching this unfold on the ultimate high definition screen in some celestial God-cave.

This prayer, however, is predicated upon another sort of a picture of God. It imagines that God is active and participant in this world, in the most intimate of ways. It asks that he pour love into our hearts, that he create something right now that is either imperfect or absent. It imagines that he is the one who can change what I feel and do. He puts that love there which values God above all things; that love of a child of God who looks to him for every blessing and trusts him implicitly, even when things are tough. He has promised great and sometimes undefined blessings. We will have to wait to see it because we cannot even imagine it. But that makes those blessing no less real.

Readings

I Kings 19:11-21 (This is always the challenge of the OT narratives, they resist the pericope format – insisting that we read them as part of a larger narrative. Elijah being in the cave, where our reading starts, is almost incomprehensible without knowing how he got there. I have included some of the story which leads up to this encounter in the cave.)

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” ³ Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

⁴ But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.” ⁵ And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, “Arise and eat.” ⁶ And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. ⁷ And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, “Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.” ⁸ And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.

⁹ There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” ¹⁰ He said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.” ¹¹ And he said, “Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD.” And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹² And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. ¹³ And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a

voice to him and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”¹⁴ He said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.”¹⁵ And the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria.¹⁶ And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place.¹⁷ And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death.¹⁸ Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

¹⁹ So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him.²⁰ And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” And he said to him, “Go back again, for what have I done to you?”²¹ And he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him.

This is a great passage of the OT and one of the fruitful places to which a preacher may come again and again. Elijah has been faithfully serving the Lord but doesn't seem to be making any progress, despite having just slaughtered some 800 idolatrous prophets of Baal and Asherah. Yet, despite calling down the flames from heaven and demonstrating the power of God, the hearts of the people are just as far away as ever.

Is this really a cautionary tale, warning us that power really does not change the hearts of people? I think it could be healthfully read that way. I remember driving around with my dad shortly before my ordination. He gave me this bit of advice which remains as sound today as it was over twenty years ago. “The Law changes nothing, only the Gospel changes things.” He meant that displays and exercises of power were only able to coerce an obedience of fear or reward or something like that. It was only love, particularly the love which was connected to the love of Christ which actually moved people to love, act, think, and be different. The Law offered an illusion of power to change. But the Law, while it can coerce a person into an external obedience, it cannot change the person. As soon as the threat is lifted, the person will reassert him/herself and the old sinner will take over.

Back to our text: Elijah is strengthened by the angel and finds himself in today's text in a cave at Mt Horeb, which is another word for Mt Sinai, the place where the covenant had been inscribed on stones for Moses. It is the birth place of Israelite faith, a holy place; it is a God place. But clearly the writer of Kings wants us to realize that God has taken Elijah back to the beginning, Elijah is returning to the very foundations of the faith. This is a reboot of Israel in a sense, at least for Elijah it is.

The Word of the Lord comes to Elijah and asks him what he is doing there and Elijah voices his complaint. He is tired, he is working too hard, and it is not working. He wants to quit. Does he sound like any church workers you know? A professional counselor who was a member of a prior parish read this with me in a Bible study and diagnosed Elijah as a classic case of burn out.

As I have discussed this passage in the past, some have objected the way Elijah describes himself. What is up with the idea that Elijah is “Jealous” for the LORD? This may be a translation issue. In modern English, Jealous is almost always negative and suggests something akin to covetousness. But think more in terms of a spouse who is unwilling to share the relationship of his or her spouse with another. That too would be called a form of jealousy, but we don’t think of that as negative all the time. It could simply be a healthy way of looking at the marriage relationship. This term, both in the ancient world and in days of the King James Translation which has so influenced modern translations, is both negative and positive.

It is interesting that the Word (Jesus) does not upbraid Elijah or scold him. He kicked the matter “upstairs.” Elijah is simply told to gird his loins and present himself outside because God is coming. (But God is the Word! How can this be any different? Such questions in the context of Trinity and the effable God often lead to statements which are simply banal. Don’t worry about it.) Three mighty, cataclysmic signs of God’s presence are then perceived. A mighty wind tears the rocks apart. An earthquake splits the ground. A fire scorches the earth. In each of them, however, God is not found.

It is a low whisper, the Hebrew here is not entirely clear, but it seems to be the sound of silence, but I think the ESV editors must have been afraid of any confusion with Simon and Garfunkel. It is in this gentle sound, this low sound, this no sound, that God is found. The opportunity to find God where we expect him, in the earthquake, fire, and wind has come and gone. God is not in the overt demonstration of power. He is found in the most unlikely places: a manger, a carpenter’s shop, the paths of rural Galilee, and hanging on a cross.

Elijah, apparently not quite ready to die yet as his earlier speech might imply, wraps his cloak around his head lest he see God and, I can only imagine, stumbles out of the cave to speak with God. He had been speaking with the Word, which is described as a person who comes and speaks with him, and now Elijah leaves to speak to someone else who has come.

Again God now asks the same question the Word asked, surely not because he was looking for information but because Elijah needed to answer it once more. His response is just about verbatim, but the cloak around his head belies the fact that he does not really want to die as he had said earlier. He is actively preserving his own life by refusing to look at God whose presence would fry him.

God’s response is also interesting. The counselor whom I referenced earlier said this was the only thing to do with burned-out people. You first get them out of the situation, change the scenery; then you get them some help for the seemingly enormous task before them. The

counsellor reconfigures the situation so they don't feel so overwhelmed. Finally, you helped them see and celebrate the effectiveness of their work. God sends Elijah on a long journey, to the diametrically opposite corner of the country and beyond. He gets him three people to help him, and that is described quite effectively, and then he tells him about 7000 people who have listened. His work has not been in vain.

We only hear of Elijah calling the first of these helpers. Indeed, it will be Elisha who is instrumental in anointing both Hazael and Jehu later in the book. Apparently even great prophets leave a few things undone.

The call of Elisha is another strange matter. He is apparently wealthy, the son of a wealthy farmer to have twelve yoke of oxen. His place at the rear pair of oxen would have been the administrative place, he could keep an eye on what was transpiring in the other eleven pairs, likely driven by servants. Elijah simply throws his cloak on him and walks off. When Elisha wants to clean up a few loose ends, he almost sends him away as Jesus deals with some who would follow him in the Gospel. Is he testing Elisha's commitment? Is he actively trying to discourage him from a job which Elijah himself is feeling a little ambivalent about? What is up with this conversation between Elijah and Elisha? The text only describes. It does not provide this sort of insight because we don't need it.

Elisha certainly burns his bridges behind him. The oxen are slaughtered and the plough is fuel for the fire of their sacrifice. There is no going back. He throws a low-carb, paleo-diet feast for the crew and sets off after Elijah. Total career change at this point in his life. I looked on Jobdango.com and there were precious few listings for assistant to the prophet in case this particular position doesn't work out.

These paragraphs suggest a number of things the preacher may want to develop. The Word of God and its nature, and the nature of God's interaction with humanity come to mind. God does not use the power and displays, they don't work. It is the small voice, the human voice of an Elijah or a you or a me. What is the difference between this Word who has come so often to Elijah in the past and God himself? The text is often somewhat ambiguous about this, as if the Word is God and at other times, as we see it here, distinct from God. Sounds like the pre-incarnate Christ to me. The Word became flesh – the same Word which talked to Elijah in the cave, the Word with which Elijah would converse on a mountain top somewhere in Palestine 900 years later and recorded in the Gospels.

One could also consider the call of Elisha here. He is pulled from the field, not the company of prophets or the prophet's sons as they are also called. They were active at this time. Indeed, they will be somewhat meddlesome when Elijah is taken to heaven and Elisha will have dealings with them on several occasions. Elisha is not one of them; he is a farmer, a successful one at that. He is the one God has in mind.

One might also want to think about the Gospel which God had for Elijah this day. He was weary, he did not think his work was achieving anything, he was discouraged. God had hope for him.

There was success he could not see, there was help he did not look for. There was still a purpose and journey to take. God was not done with him, nor was God angry with Elijah despite Elijah's apparent frustration with God and the foolish accusations he hurled heavenward. God patiently and lovingly deals with his servant here. That might be a sermon in itself.

Sermon Idea: Listening to that still, small voice (That the Holy Spirit would tune the hearer to listen to the Gospel.)

Our culture loves power. In this we are very similar to the Romans of ancient times. Power is very handy. Power gets things done: Wars are won, cities are built, and the strongest team usually wins on the football field.

But power has a serious limitation. It cannot make a woman or a man love you. It cannot conform a child to virtue. Indeed, if you try to force a woman to love you, she should run away and likely you should be arrested. The child who is forced into some sort of life which the parent considers virtuous will rebel and frequently run in exactly the opposite direction.

God knows this. He has the power. Elijah experienced the power of God. He had called down fire from heaven in a brilliant demonstration of God's superiority over Baal and Asherah on Mount Carmel in the chapter before this one. But it did not work. Indeed, this story is just about the last overt demonstration of God's power in the Bible until you get to Jesus walking on water and calming storms with a command. There are a few more. The sundial runs backward for Hezekiah and the angel of death slaughters the troops of the Assyrians. Most of the time now, God will work through people and often through apparently weak and insignificant people. When the Jews of Persia faced a genocide God did not raise up a new Moses to lead them out with power and signs. He raised a Jewish girl to be queen and she saved the Jews from destruction by throwing dinner parties. You can read about that in the story of Esther.

Even Jesus, though it is not hard to see that he has great power, he hides it and conquers our greatest foes not through some demonstration of power but through apparent weakness, even cruel death on a cross. He admits that he could call down 12 legions of angels. But he does not. He does not because power and might will not get him what he has come for. He wants hearts, he wants people. Not their fearful obedience, but their faithful obedience, their loving trust in him. (see Romans 1:5-6).

God is likewise working today. This congregation, this preacher, these words, that water, that bread and that wine do not look like powerful things. We often fail at what we want to do. But we do not fail at what God wants to do. Through us God loves this community, both outside and inside these doors.

Here the preacher will want to plug into the ministry of the congregation he serves.

This is frightening and strange. Our culture is so dominated by power and the quest for power that it obscures this greater truth of the kingdom of God. Yet, someday all this earthly power will crumble to dust and look pathetic and small in the face of God's infinitely greater power. Paul tells us in I Cor. 13 that only one thing then will remain on that day. Faith will be done, for we

will see. Hope will be fulfilled, so it won't be needed. But love is the one thing that crosses from this world to that world. So God works for love right now. We call that work the Gospel, the preaching and living of that kingdom in which Jesus has worn a crown of thorns and his people have gone to martyr's deaths and served this world with countless hours of prayer, service, and love.

Psalm 16

Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge.

² I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord;
I have no good apart from you."

³ As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones,
in whom is all my delight.

⁴ The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply;
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out
or take their names on my lips.

⁵ The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.

⁶ The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.

⁷ I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.

⁸ I have set the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.

⁹ Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices;
my flesh also dwells secure.

¹⁰ For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
or let your holy one see corruption.

¹¹ You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

This Psalm is the one which Elijah should have sung in the cave. It is the articulation of faith in a generation of idolaters. The psalmist has confidence and boldness.

Is it the one we should sing as well? Do we?

I Corinthians 1:18-25

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

²⁶ *For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”*

This Jesus not only teaches, but he turns the world upside down. Power is not the mover of the world, but indeed love is. God has a special spot for little people. He loves them when the world would cast them aside as worthless. The world values the strong, the wise, the important. It calls them noble and heaps its honors upon them. God holds the poor man in his hands and delights to pick him up, set him upon his feet and attend to his needs, great and small.

This weakness and poverty, however, ought not only to be seen in terms of its economic realities. To do so is to make the mistake of Marx. The economically potent in the world can also be morally bankrupt, in fact we find that they often are, excusing the inexcusable with cash. Just recently a young man killed driving drunk and was given a light sentence because he was too privileged and had not learned to make good moral decisions. Our people, many of which have suffered brutally in the current economic recession know this well. The bankers get bailed out, the homeowners find the stimulus to be less than stimulating sometimes. We of course almost always give them a pass on this. What we would likely call the behavior of a spoiled brat gets glamorized when perpetrator's last name is Bieber, Hilton or Kardashian. Yet, the implications of this are profound. Does God hold the morally challenged, the mentally challenged, the economically challenged, and the physically challenged in the same hand? Did Jesus die for all of this?

Our boast is not in ourselves, no matter our capacity, it is in the Lord and only in the Lord. Americans today have a hard time relating to these words which Paul preaches. Life-long Lutherans have often find such humility mixed into their childhood breakfast cereal so they are not shocked by what Paul is saying here. (My very Lutheran grandfather began almost every day with what he called “hofferschleim” which literally translates as “oat slime.” Hard not to be humble when you have that first thing in the morning!) But I wonder how often they are not, oxymoronicly, a little proud of their humility. God loves humble people, I sure am glad that I am humble so God can love me. Paul advocates here and in other places, notably in Philippians 2, an ethos which was utterly upside-down to a normal Roman and increasingly to a normal American. The man who ponders his own humility is still pondering himself. Paul advocates for a life which is truly centered on Christ.

When medieval Europe found itself in need of renewal it was a Francis of Assisi and a Dominic who attracted great followings and called the whole civilization to repentance by giving up everything, donning the rough spun habit of a penitent and begging for their meals, even though both of them came from wealthy back grounds. They were not well liked by their contemporaries and the good solid folk of the 13th century whose children ran off to follow them thought they had joined some freakish cult. Yet in their renunciation of all things for the sake of Christ they gained a stature which no wealth or power could have given them. God has used the weak and the powerless to shame the strong and the important of the world. How will he do that for this generation? Perhaps, and this is dangerous, deacons will be the instrument for God to shame the preachers, but not because that is our goal but because in emptying ourselves in service to Him we are made into the instruments of God for the sake of his precious people. How’s that for subversive?

Paul is deep into an argument here about the unity which the congregation in Corinth needs. Pride, the sort of self-focused and blind pride which sees nothing else, is toxic to unity and brotherhood. Paul’s ability to put his arm around Sosthenes (hard to believe that was less than 20 verses before the start of this reading!) is directly connected to the upside-down world which Christ’s cross and love implies. The focus upon the other, the humility, and the self-sacrifice will be the key ingredients for a true unity. Without this ability to cast one’s vision outside the self, we will always be at war with one another. Shared goals and by-laws will never keep us together in the long run.

If we use “boast” in Paul’s more positive usage, the sense in which we recount the important things of our lives, how do we see people (ourselves included!) boasting outside of Christ?

- 1. The human normal boast is to try to separate myself from the other by a favorable comparison, usually by pointing out the problems of the other which I don’t have or at least I don’t want to admit. We see boasting in anything other than Christ driving us apart, it is divisive. We will be pointing to the competitive things we value. This atomizes us, forces us into mindset in which everyone is a potential competitor, not a potential fellow member of the body of Christ. This will result in judgmental attitudes and*

behaviors. I need to point out the problems of my neighbor because it somehow affirms me.

- 2. Boasting outside of Christ is rooted in the sin our first parents: a form of self-idolatry. We will turn the conversation to ourselves, our accomplishments, our needs, our rights, our...(this list doesn't really end!) In this sort of boasting I am in the center of this universe and everything else is judged based on what it does to me.*
- 3. Boasting in anything other than Christ will find that it does eventually trust in Christ, but only as a last resort. Boasting in anything other than Christ starts somewhere else, it begins with me and my injured sense of pride, righteousness, justice, etc. It will always run in the avenues of power, not service. It only comes to virtue unwillingly.*
- 4. Boasting in something other than Christ will always expect God to notice me, what I have done, how many times I go to Church, how much I give, or even just that I am straight and not gay. God must love me more than them.*
- 5. Boasting outside of Christ will pay attention to being right and proper people, or being the right sort of rebel, it can run in all sorts of dogma and set up all sorts of rules. It will find that we use the right sort of worship songs, or we support the right sort of causes. It will have a narrowness of perspective. It often will reserve its most vitriolic antipathy for the people who are actually closest to us but just different enough to be distinguished.*

But we also need to describe and point to boasting in Christ, this person who looks at the foolishness of God and finds instead the wisdom, power, righteousness, and sanctification of which Paul speaks above. What does that look like?

- 1. We don't ask God to make sense to us, at least not by human standards. We are OK with God not making sense in his decision to forgive. God uses the most unlikely instruments, people like Jonah, Saul of Tarsus, and the slave Joseph or the murderer Moses. Jeremiah will raise the logical argument why he cannot be a prophet. God agrees and sends him anyway.*
- 2. Boasting in Christ will make Jesus the subject of lots of verbs. It turns our language. It no longer talks about us so much, but it talks about Jesus. Not because Jesus is keeping track or there is a word count going on somewhere, but because boasting in Christ means noticing that he is doing things.*
- 3. The Christ boast acknowledges that I am not wise/strong/good/righteous etc. on my own terms and likewise neither are you. Your problems are likely different from my problems, but we both stand in the presence of God by Christ's gracious action on our behalf.*
- 4. Boasting in Christ will find God's good in the middle of troubles. It will even find that suffering is an occasion for Christ's Kingdom to come. The cross, the mechanism of God's great deed for us, involved suffering. Boasting in Christ will not seek the suffering, but it will not flinch from it either. It will take what the world throws at us and frustrate*

that worldly desire by seeing that in this moment of suffering, I look a lot like Jesus. (look at the last verses of the Beatitudes passage below!)

5. *Boasting in Christ draws people together. It is not divisive, but it is cohesive. The same Jesus who did this wonderful thing in me is at work in you. That makes us one in Christ.*

Sermon Idea: Our Boast is in Christ (Epistle reading: That God would by the powerful working of the Spirit, remove the self from the center of the hearer's life, and replace that center with Christ himself and thereby create the true unity in this place.)

My mother was pretty good about telling me not be boastful. But she apparently skipped over this verse in Corinthians in which Paul seems to tell us to boast. We have a little cultural issue to get over here. In Paul's day, the word boast was not a negative like it is for us. In the Roman world to boast was simply to recount what you had done. For Caesar, returning from the Gallic wars, he boasted that he had conquered the Gauls. He was an arrogant man, no mistake, but no one thought that he should not have written his account or made public what he and his soldiers had done.

This is doubly problematic because our culture, while it may frown on boasting, effectively has us boast in Paul's sense in ourselves. The individualism which has so infused our culture turns us into a person who boasts in ourselves. We may not use the word, but we do it, every time we dive into that individualism. It is normal, we expect life to be this way. This sermon can challenge the normal way we see the world in which I am the subject of all the verbs and this is all about me.

Think about boasting like a resume or a Curriculum Vitae. If my last job promoted me to regional manager, no one would think less of me for putting that on the resume. If I won a national or other honor for my work, I should put that on there too. This would all fall under the category of boasting in Paul's world. Of course, Romans, like us, thought that padding your resume or boasting about things you had not done was decidedly against the rules. So we may need to spend a moment on this word itself.

That said, Paul is attacking the very fabric of Roman society here. They all boasted like this, it was normal, even expected. Indeed, Roman society was fiercely competitive about it. They would have written those Christmas letters you get from some people which tell you about all the wonderful things they have done. You know the letter, the one that manages to make you feel inadequate and stupid at the same time.

Paul says that the boast of the Christian is not in anything I have done. My boast is in the cross of Christ. My boast is only in a world in which I am in orbit around Jesus. He is the center of my universe, he is the gravity that pulls my life along.

While this is disturbing to the old man who believes he does belong at the center of the universe, this is a very good thing. My life is not defined by what I have done but by what Jesus has done. Have you ever been asked about who you are? Usually we respond with a form of Roman boasting, our name and then our vocation or place in life. "My name is Phil, I am a Pastor,

husband, father,..’ etc. What if we started those conversations with simply, I am someone for whom Jesus died. It might really prevent unwanted conversations at our wife’s office Christmas party.

How will we boast of the Lord Jesus? How will his name and our great love for him show up on our lips?

This has a profound impact on our lives together as a congregation. Too often congregations become a place where I can show off, where I can exercise power, where I can have one place where I am top dog. If our families are troubled, I will bring that trouble here. If my work demeans me, I will demean someone here because it makes me feel powerful for just a moment.

But our boast is in Christ. That changes all those things. He is the giver, I am the recipient. Whatever I have, I have from him. That removes me from the center of that picture in a way which empowers a true brotherhood among us. We are all united in Him, not in something which we bring to the table, nor in our agreement with each other. He has called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified through his Spirit.

Illustrating this sermon is important. I remember the period in my first parish in which three of my most influential and important households all announced that they had taken positions in other states and soon would be leaving. It was a small parish and I was really worried about this. I remember one day leaving my office upset and afraid, and suddenly it dawned me that I was saved by Grace, not through works, but through faith. It was not mine to boast about. It was as if God was telling me that this was his parish, not mine. He would take care of it, and I did not need this worry and fear. I walked into the house in a very different frame of mind. I had left the office and I was the subject of all the verbs, when I walked in the front door of my home, God was the subject of the verbs. And he came through. Within a year, we missed the friends who had left, but God raised up new leaders, brought new members, and we were stronger and better as a parish. And I had done none of it, God had done it all. The preacher will need to find his own story to tell about this, but a little episode like this can make all the difference.

Another Sermon Idea: You are and instrument of God (That the Spirit of God would work through the weakness and foolishness of the people of God to bring about Christ’s righteous reign in this place)

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians could be written to us. We like power. We like how works, we understand it, we appreciate it, and we crave it. Power seems to make our world go round and it is the powerful who enjoy life. But power is also our problem. The astute observer of human nature, Lord Acton once opined that power tends to corrupt people and absolute power corrupts them absolutely. Great men are almost all bad men.

The divisions within the people of God, perhaps even within this congregation are often rooted in our lust for power. The many evils we see depicted on our television’s nightly news and our internet feeds are often rooted in power. We think that we can be powerful and good, but so often we choose power over the good. This is true on the great scale of the powerful of the world and it

is true on the micro-scale of our relationships and families. Who doesn't know the petty co-worker who delights in power and self-advancement over the good of peers? Perhaps your experience with the power-hungry is much closer to home and for that reason even more of a problem for you.

Paul imagines a wholly other kingdom or reign in which power is not the goal but service and love are the goals. It sounds foolish and it sounds like it is the recipe to be stomped on and destroyed, but don't be deceived by the logic of our enemy and the world. This is the very kingdom of God. In this kingdom winning is losing, the king wears a crown of thorns, the dead live, and the weak and helpless (children) are at the top of the foodchain. Paul rejoices in suffering in this kingdom. Jesus says that persecuted are blessed. Watched any news footage of ISIS and hostages lately? Is that hard to say?

The cross, which is foolishness to the world and Satan is the very salvation which God has wrought. It is a power of another sort, a power which changes people instead of controlling them, a power which liberates instead of enslaving, and a power which is not grasped but given.

The preacher will need to put skin on this. The closer to home you can make it, the better. I am right now teaching a class which is looking at the Lord of the Rings by Tolkien and Frodo's role in this whole story seems to be an exploration of this theology of the cross. But I am not sure how effective that is as a sermon illustration but in the right context it could be effective to show a clip from the film.

Of course Jesus is not only asking for this, he does it. The cross is the emblem of Christianity for a reason. It marks the mechanism of God's kingdom come, his will done, his creation restored. It happens when God loses all and that self-losing God has taken up residence in our hearts and lives today.

As one old crusty preacher once said to a bunch of new confirmands: "I hope you look good on wood!"

Or

I Peter 3:8-15

⁸ Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. ⁹ Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. ¹⁰ For

“Whoever desires to love life
and see good days,

let him keep his tongue from evil
and his lips from speaking deceit;

¹¹ let him turn away from evil and do good;
let him seek peace and pursue it.

¹²For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their prayer.
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

¹³Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? ¹⁴But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶*having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.* ¹⁷*For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.*

Luke 5:1-11

¹On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, ²and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. ⁴And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." ⁵And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." ⁶And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. ⁷They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." ⁹For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, ¹⁰and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." ¹¹And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

Luther

1. This Gospel is easy for those to understand who believe, and it presents to us two thoughts, namely: Faith in its relation to temporal blessings, and faith in its relation to eternal blessings.
2. In the first place Christ shows that those who believe on him will certainly have sufficient also for his present life. And this he does in that he gives Peter and partners such a great multitude of fishes, more than they had any reason to expect; also, in that Christ also provides for the feeding of our stomachs, if it were not only for our cursed unbelief. For behold Peter and look deep into his heart and you will find, that he had no idea that he should catch so many fishes; then God came and drove the fish into the net, and more than all the disciples had desired.

3. Therefore this is an example that all who believe will have enough for their temporal needs; but those who do not believe can never get enough and have no rest in scheming how to secure riches, by which they fall into all kinds of vice...

5. For it has ever been a curse that we cannot trust God even for the daily food our stomachs crave, and that we continually think we are to die from hunger; and yet, we are to have enough, as Christ in Mt. 6:25ff. says...

6. Here you see how God cares for the birds and flowers, and adorns them so beautifully; much more will he give us what we need; and yet we cannot trust him. So successfully has the devil taken us captive by his snares. If one comes now so far that he is not satisfied and does not trust God, then love must at once cease, so that he does no one any good, but he scratches together everything only on his own heap.

8. Now, here is an example that excites us to trust in God, and first for the needs of the stomach; since he cares for us also in temporal things. This we see here in the case of Peter when he thus caught a great multitude of fishes, more than filled their boats. From this is clearly shown that God will forsake no one, each must have what he needs, if he trusts in God alone...There is no lack of provisions, only a lack of faith; before that should take place the angels would come and minister unto us. Therefore the fact that the people suffer now such need, is caused only by unbelief.

11. Therefore if you wish to lead a truly Christian life, let thy God see to it how the fishes come into your net, and go and enter some calling life that you may labor. But we all wish to fill such positions, where we do not need to labor; that has ever been the trick of the devil.

15. After the disciples caught the fishes and tasted the fruit of faith, their faith increased and grew. Now, we must first come to the point that we can commit unto God the care of our stomachs. For whoever cannot entrust that to God, can never commit unto him his soul. But this is only the faith of the child, where we learn to go to the public bank and continue to suck our mother's breast. Yet, by this we must learn to confide our soul to God for his keeping. This today's Gospel aims to do.

16. Let Peter here be a figure of those who should believe in the eternal possessions, and substitute for him the conscience, that now awaits and looks for temporal blessings and possessions. A sinful conscience by reason of its nature is apt to do just as Peter does here, flee from its Savior and think: O, God, I am not worthy to be saved and sit among the saints and angels! Oh, that treasure is far too high for me! here the narrow small conscience cannot grasp these great treasures, but things: Yes, if I were as St. Peter and Paul, then I might believe it. This is foolish; for should you wish to establish yourself upon your holiness, then you would build on the sand. No, not so; but do like St. Peter. For in that he considered himself so unworthy, then he became first worthy. And just because you are a sinful person, you must trust. Here you

must open wide your conscience and greatly expand your heart, in order that grace may flow freely into them.

17. If you have now learned to know God, then refuse him nothing whatever; that is, if we behold the great treasures, then we should not despair. It is proper that we know ourselves, and the more thoroughly we do this the better; but you must not reject grace because of your sins. For if you find that your conscience struggles and would drive you to despair, then you are most comfortable and fortunate; then you will find the consolation in your conscience,...Therefore you must not despair, although your conscience struggles and feels its sins; for the more disgraced you are, the quicker God imparts grace.

18. Now the great multitude of people go and dress themselves like the kitten does, and think God will then accept them. No, the Scriptures praise God that he takes away sins and casts them into the ocean.

19. Therefore, if feel my sins and become like St. Peter, and would run away from God; then I must first turn and approach nearer and nearer to him. For if god had fled and not desired to take away your sins, he would not have come to you and run after you. Therefore the more you feel that you are a sinful man and the more wish to flee from God, the more you should press forward to him; mark that well.

20. But what did Christ do, when Peter humbled himself and in the face of great fear and terror he asked the Lord to depart from him? Did he let him stick in his despair? No, but he came to him, and comforted him and said: "Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men."

21. These are evangelical or Gospel words, that comfort weak hearts. And just in this way God makes our work and temptation golden before our eyes. Therefore observe now, how God provides for our bodies, in that he here gives Peter a great multitude of fishes, when he would have had enough with two, and in like manner satisfies and enriches him spiritually, so that he could from his fullness impart to other, and thus be made him a natural and spiritual fisherman; a natural fisherman in that he caught a great multitude of fishes which he could sell; a spiritual fisherman in that he should henceforth catch men; for he had now the Gospel, by which he should gather the people and enlarge the kingdom of Christ.

(*Sermons of Martin Luther*, Vol. 4. Ed.: Nikolas Lenker. Baker Publ. Reprint 2000. 131-140)

So are you fishing or catching? Are you fishing in the day or at night? Our nets are not reasonable things to fish with during the day, but Jesus sends them out. He sends them out at the wrong time, when it should not work, and it does. Suddenly the men who had a problem in that they caught nothing, find they have another problem – too many fish. We often like to sit in the pews and think that if we try this we will scare people away, my net is just too crude, I am no good at this, I cannot be a catcher of people, I will frighten them. But Jesus sends us out, this is

not an optional activity. Jesus does not say, “How’s this sound, what if I make you a fisher of people.” He just tells Peter and the gang what he is going to do. And they leave all and follow him.

What is a full net? Is it a good thing? Was it good news for the fish? The boats are sinking, it doesn’t even sound so good for the fisherman? What is happening here? Jesus has so many people that they are literally driving him into the boat? Is he concerned for the financial well-being of the brothers? Does he give them enough fish to sell and fund their excursion with Jesus?

One of the things that makes Jesus divine in the estimation of the Gospels is that he is immensely attractive to people. They flock to him. Today we see the crowds literally pushing against him so hard he has to get into a boat. But then we get the picture of Jesus interacting with one of those men, a man named Simon who will come to be better known to us as Peter and in that singular instance we get an idea of what made Jesus such a powerfully attractive personality.

Jesus’ ministry is a huge success, at least in terms of numbers. It is helpful to remember that these same Jewish crowds will abandon him and some may even shout “Crucify” in Pilate’s square, but at least right now he is the darling of all the Church Growth types. He even gets creative and innovative in his technique, stepping into a boat so he can teach. I wonder how that worked. I have stood on the shore of various lakes, large and small, and the wave action always makes just enough noise that I find it hard to hear over any distance when someone speaks to me.

The bulk of the story revolves around his encounter with Peter. Jesus preaches and teaches and then as a sort of tip to the fisherman who has lent him a boat, he instructs them to go out deeper and cast their nets over the side. This was a strange thing to do. In the days of Jesus they did not have monofilament line or modern materials, the nets were thick and heavy affairs, cast by hand over the side of a boat. Limited in their size, during the day they were simply ineffective. The fish seeing this large heavy net above them, would simply swim out of the way. They only worked at night. Only an idiot carpenter would fish with a net during the day.

But Jesus is on a fishing expedition of his own, and his catch is not of the scaly kind. Peter protests but the preaching of this man in his boat must have been significant. He puts the net over the side and even though he had had no luck all night when the fishing was supposed to happen, here in the day time, he hauls up a huge catch of fish. The catch is so large he needs his partners to help haul it in. Jesus ends up with a haul of his own, three disciples join his movement that day, names which will come down to us from ancient times and be revered throughout the world to this day: Peter, James, and John.

The observant student of the NT may want to notice something here. it is not explicitly stated in the text, but this is not the first time Jesus and Peter have met. The first chapter of John suggests that Peter’s brother Andrew had been following the Baptist and spent a day with Peter and Jesus along with John before the arrest of John the Baptist. Because these events take place after John’s arrest in the story line, Peter and Jesus have already made an acquaintance. It would

appear that Jesus' selection of Peter's boat is not entirely accidental. It would also appear that Jesus is picking up John's old disciples.

Of course the preacher, having read the OT lesson may well want to dwell on Peter's response to Jesus and can do so quite fruitfully. Peter speaks the truth and begs Jesus to leave him in his sin. He is afraid of the holiness of God, which is the beginning of wisdom. But fear of God is not the end of wisdom. Jesus has not come to condemn the world but to save it. He will transform this sinful fisherman, a man interested in the kingdom of God, into a man who will boldly preach and teach and lead many to Christ. Peter will be the rock, one of the foundation stones on which God builds his church (Ephesians 2:19ff)

That same Jesus is calling his people today. Yes, with Isaiah and Peter we have a confession to make, but God hears that, touches our lips, fills our net with fish, and sends us out of these doors with a message to tell and a world's salvation to engage. He will do the saving, he will do the heavy lifting here, but he forgives us, equips us for ministry, and sends us out into this world to the places in which we work, live, play, eat, learn, and gather.

Sermon Idea Jesus is calling you; Do not be afraid (That the hearer would understand that God's call to service is not predicated on his or her suitability, perfection or desire for the task, but instead, it is God's gracious invitation to join Him in His work, All necessary tools, talents and even the "catch" are provided.)

We have often focused on the fishing, the net, the equipment, the catch, but have we talked about the players in neighborhood of all this fishing?

Shall we talk about the net as the Gospel? This Gospel that has taken root in our hearts is the daytime net. The clunky night time net is me. God casts them both into this community. The Gospel which he casts into this community, is in some part, cast through me. I look at my own ability to be the catcher of men for the kingdom of God and I am dismayed, as Peter would have said it was a foolish thing to cast his heavy net into the bright sunlit waters of the lake of Genneseret. If you throw me into the water, I am a lousy net, I am not an attractive thing except to the occasional carnivore looking for an easy meal. But oddly, Jesus does cast us into the water, but in our very weakness resides his very love and Gospel itself.

My fear of failure cripples me in this regard, I feel that if I do not succeed, somehow I will be laughed at, or even condemned. But Jesus did not choose the eloquent, the powerful, or even the particularly wise. He chose fishermen, blue collar guys, men who were not even particularly successful fishermen apparently.

He has chosen us, all of us, the folks in the congregation to which I preach. He can use all sorts of folks to be the net. It is true that Peter would walk with Jesus for some time before he was sent out, as indeed we are encouraged and invited to walk with him, to listen at his feet, to immerse ourselves in Jesus. But one cannot forget that the purpose of this immersion, of this discipleship was the catching of men.

The good news in all this is that we have a place in God's plan for the salvation of the world. He has given us a promise that though we are not what you would expect to be a successful catcher of men, he has promised: I will be a catcher of men. But will I always be a successful catcher of men?

Peter had had a fruitless night of fishing. He took a lousy fisherman and sent him out to an illustrious success. Peter now is being sent out into a world to do another sort of fishing. His success or failure will not be Peter's but God's. If he succeeds he must give glory to God, for God is the one who fills the nets. If he has what looks like a catastrophic failure on the scale of Isaiah, that too is part of God's larger plan. The burned out stump that is all that is left of Isaiah's message is the hopeful seed. Isaiah was sent to fail as a prophet, but God had a masterful plan of his kingdom somewhere in there.

As we are sent out of these doors I cannot promise you a net full of fish, but I can promise you that Jesus goes with you, that he will use your words, deeds, whole life, to be an instrument of his grace to the people around you. He will make this work for his kingdom, not my kingdom, and that takes a huge burden off my shoulders. I am not ultimately responsible for the success of this endeavor.

(Credits – this sermon was the brain child of Walt Lux, a deacon of the NW district who is now in glory.)