

## The Catchers and the Caught

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 10, 2019

“From now on you will be catching people.” – Luke 5:10b

Somewhere in my training for the ministry, one of my teachers repeated an old adage that says that Christianity is not taught, it's caught. This morning's gospel reading from Luke, with its talk of catching fish and catching people, reminded me of that saying. And I wondered what Jesus might have had in mind for Peter and the people he'd be catching when he used and left us that image. After you're caught – then what?

The kind of Christianity that's caught rather than taught is the life-altering variety, not the Sunday School variety. Sunday School might help put a person in the right place at the right time doing the right thing, but whether that person catches life-changing Christianity isn't up to our Sunday School teachers or our pastors. That kind of Christianity passes from person to person largely beyond our conscious control. You can't buy or build a curriculum for that kind of Christianity. You can only live a life so transformed by that kind of Christianity that others want to know what happened.

A few days ago, I was having lunch with an African American friend who told me of the shock he received as a young black man in Harvard College when he enrolled in Orlando Patterson's course on slavery. Professor Patterson was born in Jamaica and is one of the world's experts on slavery, and when my then-young friend from Atlanta heard and saw a black Harvard professor hold in thrall hundreds of undergraduates as he spoke about slavery across centuries and cultures, that young African American's understanding of himself and what he might aspire to changed completely, and his life was never the same again. That, I imagine, hope, and pray is the way Christianity affected people in its earliest days.

God's grace, of course, is what we're talking about, and it's grace that lies beneath the Christianity that changes lives. And despite what we think when we first hear the word, grace is more like the flu than a feel-good greeting card. The kind of take-you-by-the-scruff-of-the-neck grasp of the Holy Spirit that we know to be genuine conversion isn't anything we can control. It's something that comes to you, like an insight or a bolt out of the blue. You don't grasp it, it grasps you. And when it does, you're not the same afterward.

Many of you know that I went off to college to be a doctor. I had no intention, in those days, of entering the ministry. My feeling about pastors was that if they weren't holier than thou, they were certainly holier than me, and I didn't belong among their ranks. There are days when I still feel that way. As an older colleague of mine once put it, all of us in the ministry sometimes feel as though we're Dr. Sigmund Fraud.

But one Sunday morning when I was a college student, as I sat in the choir loft listening to the preacher explain why Christianity insists on the truth of its historical core, it came to me: they had it all wrong. My super-pious Southern Baptist forebears had the gospel all turned around. Faith, as I'd been raised in it, was about trying to make yourself good enough so that you'd go to heaven when you died. But that wasn't what the Bible taught at all. The Bible teaches that God so loved the world that God

has already said yes to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ – gave His only begotten Son -- and all we have to do is accept our own acceptance – that whosoever believeth in him might not perish but have everlasting life. That's the gospel, and it really is good news. And when it came to me in full force that Sunday morning, it changed everything. Medicine gradually moved out and ministry gradually moved in, and the future I'd envisioned for myself since high school faded away.

And I didn't have any more control over that conversion experience than I have over the flu. I was a college student of unclean lips back in Bloomington, Indiana, then – I said all the right words but I really wasn't grasped by the reality to which they pointed – and I remain a person of unclean lips in Richmond Heights today, just like all of you, and just like the prophet Isaiah in our first lesson.

Isaiah of Jerusalem was a court prophet – he was on the king's payroll to help the king make important decisions by offering a spiritual perspective – and he saw the Lord high and lifted up in the year 740 BC, the year that King Uzziah died. Isaiah couldn't have been very old when he had that vision – probably about the age of a college student – when he was seized by the existential awareness of that great gulf that separates us from God. “Woe is me!” he cried, “I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.”

Isaiah thought he was lost, but he was actually being found. He was being called. He was being called to speak, and in his vision, a seraph cleansed his lips and his life with a live coal taken from the altar. Isaiah was purified for his task, but he remained a sinner, as we all are, even as he accepted his God-given task. Being called and being changed are real, to be sure, but none of us escapes ourselves in this life. We are part of that great catch of fish called the people of God, for better and for worse. Catcher or caught, we're all in this together.

God was calling Isaiah to be a prophet to those people, and it was a tough year to receive a life-changing call, because the people of God were anxious about what would become of them now that their beloved King Uzziah had died after a reign of fifty-two years. Those had been good years – prosperous years and secure years – and the people needed reassuring. So God called Isaiah to speak to that anxious moment, but what God told Isaiah to say wasn't very reassuring, at least not in the short term.

“Go and say to this people, 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.”

That's a grim assignment for a prophet; it's a grim assignment for anyone who feels God's call to speak. Tell the people who go to church that they're not getting it. Tell the people out there in Pewville that they really don't understand what it means to love God above everything else and to love your neighbor as you love yourself. Tell the people who pay your salary that you're going to keep saying things that will make their minds dull and leave them feeling good about themselves so that they will not turn and be spiritually and physically healed.

“How long,” Isaiah asked, “do I have to do that?” and God said until cities lie wasted and empty and homes are abandoned and the land isn't good for anything anymore and there's only a tiny stump of the people of God left.

But that stump that will remain is holy, because it contains the seed of new life. And God is the God of the living, which is to say that God is the God of the possibility of our getting it right. The dead had their chance; now it's the turn of the living. Perhaps they'll get it right or at least get closer to getting it right. Perhaps they'll learn from the dead and not repeat their mistakes. Or perhaps they

won't. Either way, the fresh branch will grow from the stump of righteousness that's left. That's God's way. That's God's promise. God says in effect to Isaiah, I'm in charge here, not you, not Uzziah, and not the people with unclean lips. Things may get very bad, but I'm still in charge. Do not be afraid.

Do not be afraid, Jesus said to Peter, when God Incarnate called that fisherman. Like Isaiah, Peter became afraid when he brushed against the miraculous, in his case the miraculous that threatened to break his nets and swamp his boat with abundance.

"Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" was Peter's response to the catch of a lifetime. Peter wanted fish, Jesus gave him fish, and what did Peter do in return? He freaked out, and tried to push away the one who gave him everything he wanted.

How typical. How just like us. How just like Isaiah's contemporaries. Pushing away the bounty that could be ours if we'd accept the call of the miraculous. If we'd accept the call of God to make us us. If we'd accept God's invitation to make us who we could be in God's hands – a fisherman in God's image and likeness, an accountant in God's image and likeness, a nurse in God's image and likeness, an office manager in God's image and likeness, a business owner in God's image and likeness.

We could be all of those things – that we believe, I believe – and perhaps that's why we're still here in the net of the church. Like Isaiah in the temple, we show up to do our duty, but we live in the hope that we might still be caught. Caught by a vision of what the world might yet be. Caught by a sense that God has something more for us to do. Caught by a love that will not let us go.

Peter did leave his nets and he did follow Jesus and he did deny Jesus three times and he did become the rock on which the church was founded. Peter was both catcher and caught, as all of us baptized Christians are called to be. The Spirit has caught us or we wouldn't be here this morning. And maybe, like Peter, we'll catch some others, as I was caught, in church, that Sunday morning years ago. But whether we do or not, we're all in this together, catchers and caught alike, and the God of the holy stump is still in charge.