

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

JANUARY 25, 2015

ST. CHRISTOPHER'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

She caught my arm as I walked through the bar of the Montgomery Country Club –  
A most unlikely place for an “epiphany.”

I did not know her well – I suppose she was a “social acquaintance.”

I knew she was an Episcopalian, though not in our parish.

And that recently she had been through a painful and bitter divorce.

Knew that her husband had been awarded custody of their two young children.

Knew that she was leaving town soon –

Leaving to begin what I was sure she hoped would be a new and better life.

But on this Friday night, in the middle of the hubbub and easy laughter, she sat drinking steadily and drinking alone.

“I hear you’re going to seminary,” she said a bit too loudly.

“Going up to Sewanee.”

Her bejeweled hand was heavy on my arm as she looked up at me –

Standing there by her lonely table,

Uncomfortable, embarrassed,

Anxious to get away and join Carolyn and our friends in the dining room –

Feeling certain that everyone was looking at us.

Some were.

“Yes,” I admitted, “yep, we are leaving in a couple of weeks.”

“Oh,” she said, tears visible in her eyes.

“Oh, I think it’s just wonderful!”

I went into my “Aw, shucks, ma’am, it’s really nothing,” false modesty John Wayne routine.

I responded, “We’d better withhold judgment on that,

Wait until we see how seminary goes -

Till we know how things work out.”

You see, in my egocentricity I thought she was saying that I was wonderful.

“No,” she said even louder, shaking her head angrily.

“No, you don’t understand, do you?”

It’s not how it works out.

What’s wonderful is that you’re going!” she said.

“It’s wonderful that you’re going.”

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus has just returned from his time of wrestling with his call to ministry –

From his time of temptation in the wilderness, fasting and praying.

In his full humanity, Jesus has been trying to discern his Father’s will for him –

His Father's call to him.

Clearly he was to be a rabbi, a teacher, but was there more?

What was he to do and to be, as God's beloved Son?

His Cousin John, who had recently baptized him, was now in prison.

Jesus has taken his first tentative steps toward Jerusalem,

Taking up where John had left off, proclaiming,

"The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near;

Repent and believe in the good news."

He has already invited two interested men, Philip and Nathanael, to follow him, as rabbis often did.

And now we hear of his invitation to two brothers, Simon and Andrew, and soon after, another pair of brothers, James and John, sons of Zebedee - all Galilean fisherman.

Jesus calls them to join him and Philip and Nathanael in a mysterious ministry adventure.

The central theme for this Third Sunday after the Epiphany is obviously

the call to follow Jesus,

and the repentance - that is, the turning from our old life to a new one - that it always requires.

This is really a continuation of the First Sunday of Epiphany, as we recalled our Lord's baptism and our own, which was when and where his call and ours begin -

And then the response to it - our discernment and our answer -

The life we live after we say,

"I do; I will."

If we take this call of our Savior seriously -

this call that comes to us in diverse and often strange, puzzling, disconcerting, and wonderful ways -

if and when we take our call seriously, then much of our Christian life is focused on whether and how to answer that call,

to repent like those Ninevites we just read about,

to turn from our evil and even not so evil ways,

to turn and follow Jesus, and live a new and holy life,

or not.

Or not.

That is not an easy decision to make, and if we do repent and follow - it is an even harder one to faithfully maintain.

That is why we so often need to pray to God, as we did in our Collect for Today -

To ask God to help us to, "answer readily the call of our Savior and proclaim to all people the good news of God's salvation."

Or as Jesus invites and promises Peter and Andrew, James and John,

To help us become "fishers of people."

What does that mean for us?

What does it mean to proclaim the good news?  
What does it mean to fish for people?  
How are we supposed to do that?

The answers to those questions are what we do here, in this place.  
That is what we are supposed to be about, Sunday-by-Sunday, Day-by-Day.  
And we need to pay close attention to how faithfully and well we do that.  
But that comes later, after we have responded,  
After we have decided to trust the one who has called us,  
never knowing how or if it will work out.  
Often it seem that it takes a crisis of some kind to open our ears,  
To incline and allow and impel us to first hear, and then to answer, "Yes."

That appears to have been the case with Jesus.  
Perhaps it was his baptismal epiphany.  
Perhaps it was the arrest of John.  
It may be sudden or gradual, simple or complex,  
but it is seldom clear and never easy.

I know I sure struggled to hold on to my old, comfortable, not so evil life.  
Wishing that the Holy Spirit or whatever it was,  
Would leave me in peace.  
Would knock off that gnawing certainty that I was not then,  
and was not in the process of becoming what I was created to be,  
baptized to be,  
saved to be,  
called to be.  
I suspect most of you know just what I am talking about.

During my period of wrestling, our next-door neighbor happened to be an Episcopal priest  
and a friend.  
He was rector of a nearby parish, and it had been helpful for me to get another  
perspective, to hear a different voice, than my own priest's.  
And so he and I had often discussed my situation, my struggle, my conflicted feelings.  
One spring day as I sat on a tree stump supervising him tending their beautiful garden, I  
raised the subject of seminary once again –  
Probably for the hundredth time.  
He continued spraying his tomatoes for a minute, then turned to me and said not unkindly,  
but uncharacteristically firmly,

“You know, Rusty, “he said, “I’m getting pretty tired of hearing this same stuff over and over. It seems to me that it’s time for you to either put up or shut up – to either fish or cut bait.”

The actual expression he used - his exact words were not quite that polite,  
And coming from this soft-spoken priest,  
they jarred me out of my self-absorbed lethargy.  
I suppose I repented, and in two days my decision had been made.  
I talked with my rector, he talked to our bishop, and that next summer I was walking  
through the bar of the Montgomery Country Club on the way to seminary.

That was almost 40 years ago, and that woman in the bar somehow knew something that  
it has taken me many of those years to learn –  
A truth for which she no doubt had paid a very high price.  
This important part of the good news that she shared with me for free - an act of grace and  
of ministry.

God bless her.

I guess you could say she was fishing for people.

I want to share – am happy to share - that same good news with you.

And it is this:

Even when we are mistaken in our initial response to God’s call,  
Or when we are correct, but respond for very murky, sometimes shameful reasons,  
Or when we try our best and fail, time and time again, until we question whether we have  
heard a call to follow or it has been a wrong number,  
The Gospel, the good news that Jesus proclaimed and that the woman understood and  
shared, is that God can and will use and accept us all.

Always has and always will.

Jesus did not say and does not say,

“Get your theology right and follow me,” or

“Get your act together and follow me,” or

“Don’t make any mistakes and follow me,” or even,

“Sin no more and follow me.”

No, Jesus simply says, “Follow me.”

“Follow me.”

And that is part of the mystery and pain and wonder and joy of it.

That Jesus calls us and accepts us and loves us just as we are.

This call to be a disciple of Christ and to live a Christian life is often vague, confusing,  
troubling and inexplicable,

And there are no guarantees that it will work out at all, or as we expect.

And we may end up where we never expected to be, doing what we never expected to do.

Just remember that it is not we who choose Jesus,

But Jesus who chooses us –

The same Jesus who called those disciples by the Sea of Galilee –

Demanding everything;  
Promising everything.

Today is our annual parish meeting.  
Read and listen to the reports – the state of the parish.  
Because what is true for individual Christians is also true for parishes.  
Ask yourself, “How are we responding to Jesus call to follow?”  
“Of what should we repent?”  
“How can my ministry help?”  
“What does our Savior want us to do?”

No guarantees that it will work out.  
No guarantees that we will end up where we expected to be,  
doing what we expected to do,  
or with the rector we expected.

Yet there is one guarantee, a “double your money back” guarantee.  
Jesus guarantees us that when we follow him,  
He will gladly, gratefully, joyfully accept whatever we are willing to give him,  
And regardless of how it works out,  
he will never deny us or desert us;  
That there is nothing in this world or the next that can separate us from his amazing Love  
for us;  
That he will give us all the fishing instructions we need to follow him into his Father’s  
Kingdom with full nets.  
That it is in the following that we are transformed – that we are reborn.  
And we are guaranteed that the new life we enter will be wonderful.

“No,” she said even louder, shaking her head angrily.  
“You don’t understand, do you?  
It’s not how it works out.  
What’s wonderful is that you’re going.