

Epiphany 5: Year C: February 7, 2010      Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

Every week, millions of Americans put down a few bucks on a lottery ticket. Some might even admit to sending back that Sweepstakes entry form. I bought some tickets for the raffle here Friday night and am glad to report that my luck has not changed. For many, buying a sweepstakes or lottery ticket is a harmless little indulgence. I purchase mine with a little bit of hope placed in sheer luck. Now suppose tomorrow your number suddenly comes up and you hold the winning ticket. Millions of dollars are yours for the taking. Doesn't that just-for-fun lottery ticket now become deadly serious business? It's no longer a frivolous fancy. Now it is the key to your whole future.

Wouldn't you guard that ticket with your life? Wouldn't you run with it clutched in your hand to the lottery commission to stake your claim? Wouldn't you tear apart your house, your office, your car to find it if it were misplaced? Or would you just look at that winning ticket, smile, and say, "Oh well," and toss it away? ... Throw away a sure thing? Fling away free money?

Why, that would make you as foolish as the men in today's Gospel: Simon Peter, James and John.

Simon and his fishing partners were not just playing with boats. For them, fishing was a tough, exhausting profession, a way of making a living that forced them out onto the lake in the wee hours of the night when the fish were rising, and kept them laboring far into the day -- washing and repairing their nets, tending to their boats, and, hopefully, selling their catch.

Through long hours of constant work, Simon and his partners were able to scrape by -- most of the time. But their livelihood always depended on a certain amount of luck -- would the fish be biting today or not? Sometimes, despite all their hard work, all their careful preparations, the results were empty nets -- which translated into empty purses and empty stomachs.

In today's gospel text, Simon Peter and his fishing partners suddenly hit the big time. Jesus appears on the scene and his advice becomes their ticket to success. By following a long-shot tip to set out for deep water at clearly the wrong time of day, Simon Peter and the others let their nets down into a jackpot. His nets near to tearing apart, his boat swamped by the weight and wealth of this tremendous catch, Simon Peter at first does everything he can to ensure that this bounty is safely aboard. Simon calls over his fishing partners, and together they quickly fill a second boat to the sinking point. But suddenly Simon Peter realizes that he is not just standing in the middle of two boatloads of fish. He is standing in the middle of a miracle. With just a word, Jesus had made these fishermen more successful than they had ever dreamed possible. But Simon Peter doesn't feel like a winner. Instead, he is overcome by this encounter with the holy. "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man", he cries. In despair, not in thanks for all this bounty, Simon Peter collapses at Jesus' knees.

Standing in the midst of an economic bounty, Simon Peter hears from Jesus the words that will truly transform his life. It is a message that completely rejects the miracle of wealth that fills the boats. Jesus calls Simon Peter away from a life that has just now grown immensely richer and easier. Leave off catching fish, Jesus calls, "from now on you will be catching people."

If you were Peter, what would you do? First, this Jesus dumps an earthly fortune at your feet. Then this Jesus tells you to leave this fortune and take up an entirely new enterprise -- one you have no experience with whatsoever. Does this sound smart? Does this sound like reasonable advice to you? Would you do the economically smart thing, the safe thing? Jesus has made these fishermen wonderfully successful in the eyes of the world -- perhaps for the first time in their lives.

With the same humility and conviction that collapsed Peter before Jesus "... I am a sinful man," this simple fisherman and his companions are so moved by the spirit of Jesus and the power of his presence that they take a truly stunning course of action. Hauling the loaded boats ashore, these fishermen abandon their new wealth and leave behind their old symbols of security. Jesus has called them to service and "they left everything and followed him."

In today's Old Testament lesson, the prophet Isaiah gets the call to service in another dramatic way. He sees the Lord "sitting on a throne" (Isaiah 6:1). He hears one seraph call to another, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts". He smells the smoke that fills the house of the Lord, and feels the pivots on the thresholds shake. Isaiah's first response to his vision of God parallels Peter's. Isaiah expresses his guilt. "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips". Then his mouth is touched with a burning coal and an angel proclaims: "Your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out". The progression is clear: Isaiah saw God, he saw himself, and he received absolution. Now the voice of the Lord calls to Isaiah, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And Isaiah responds, "Here am I; send me!".

Isaiah, like Peter, knew that forgiveness freed him to go in a new direction, not to return to his former ways. He believed that new life was being given to him so that he could serve the Lord, and so he offered to go in whatever direction God would send him. Isaiah became one of the greatest of the prophets, speaking God's word to a troubled, corrupt and sinful society.

Now I doubt that most of our calls to service have been or will be as dramatic as Isaiah's or Saul's, blinded on the road to Damascus. If we wait for awesome epiphanies, we may be waiting a long time. Perhaps more of us sense God's presence in quiet moments of reflection and in actions that confirm that we have been called to be disciples of Christ. Responding to this call will present some challenging times.

There will be times in your life as a disciple that you will have to decide to go outside your comfort zone to provide comfort to another.

There will be times in your life as a disciple that you will have to walk away from the world's standard of "success" because it requires a piece of your soul.

There will be times in your life as a disciple when you will have to open your heart and give your trust, risking that they may be broken.

But Jesus also offers us a life filled with the joy of discipleship. Jesus offers us purpose. Jesus offers us service. Jesus offers us God's pleasure. Jesus offers us God's peace. Jesus offers us divine love and redemption. These are the joys of discipleship -- of knowing we have been called by Christ to "catch the lost" by proclaiming the Good News of the gospel to the world. Let us all pray for guidance as Christ Jesus continues to call us into pathways of ministry and service.

In the name of Jesus, our Guide and Teacher. Amen.