

Disciples Called Together

3rd of 3 Church as Community

by

The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

February 6, 2022

Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” ⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

⁵And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” ⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” ⁵Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” ⁶When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” ⁹For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” ¹¹When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Back in December there was a cartoon in the paper by Christopher Weyant entitled “Holiday Rules.” A couple, dressed for a party, is standing on the front porch of a house with a wreath on the door. The man is holding a bottle of wine and has turned around to listen to his casserole-carrying wife saying: “Remember, do not bring up politics, science, race, religion, the economy, medicine, gender, sports, news, traffic or weather.”¹

That cartoon captures the time in which we live, doesn’t it? Everything is contested. Even the weather. Surely you’ve noticed the European weather model is always heading in a slightly different direction from the American one. Everything is contested. So, how do we heed this gospel charge to “catch people”?

How do we dare invite others in to a community of God’s people – in this time, when there seems to be so little commonality about what is right, what is just, what is true? Why would we want to “catch people” to follow in the way of Jesus when even the Christian church, in its various splintered denominations, has often forsaken God’s ways for partisan politics, for exclusive stances on who’s in and who’s not; when the church itself needs to repent of its history of racism and anti-Semitism, and sense of dominion exercised at the expense of other humans and the earth itself. How to catch people in this time when even church people define ourselves over and against the other, often simply reflecting the culture around us.

And we all know that vitriolic human interactions are exasperated these days by social media. Human interaction over much of social media means people do not have to look one another in the eye; there is no embodied sense of human connection, or, for consideration of church as community, online, you don’t have to sit together in the pew. The call to discipleship is a calling of God to people for the building up of human community for God’s good purposes. All of which needs to be

¹ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 12/29/21

reconsidered as we ponder what it means to be the church, a gathering of people for worship, care and service, in this contentious time where everything is contested, but also when so much human interaction over social media is dis-embodied.

Roxane Gay is a Yale University English Professor of Haitian descent. She has observed how social media has changed over time. Fifteen years ago, when she was a graduate student in a fairly remote, small university town with few other people of color, she found social media an important means of human connection. She met other emerging writers online, found a more diverse professional community online, where they celebrated one another's joys and accomplishments.

“Something fundamental has changed since then,” she writes now. “I don't enjoy most social media anymore... Increasingly, I've felt that online engagement is fueled by the hopelessness many people feel when we consider the state of the world and the challenges we deal with in our day-to-day lives. Online spaces offer the hopeful fiction of a tangible cause and effect – an injustice answered by an immediate consequence.” She writes, “On Twitter, we can wield a small measure of power, avenge wrongs, punish villains, and exalt the pure of heart.” “In our quest for this illusion of justice, however, we have lost all sense of proportion and scale. We hold in equal contempt a war criminal and a fiction writer who transparently borrows from someone else's life. It's hard to calibrate how we engage.”

Roxane Gay goes on: “In real life, we are fearful Davids staring down seemingly omnipotent Goliaths: a Supreme Court poised to undermine civil rights; a patch of sea on fire from a gas leak; an incoherent but surprisingly effective attack on teaching children America's real history; the dismantling of the Voting Rights Act... At least online, we can tell ourselves that the power imbalances between us flatten. After a while, however, the lines blur, and it's not at all clear what a friend or foe look like, or how we as humans should interact in this (online) place. The social media experience,” she

concludes, “that was once charming and fun has become stressful and largely unpleasant” ... as people have “become hammers looking for nails.”²

Now, I don’t have any interest in condemning all social media. The church uses it to keep people informed and connected. I know the good value of it I have a Twitter account and proudly follow a sum total of two people. And no, I am not likely to tell you who they are! But I think we can agree that hearing these Call stories of Isaiah and of the Disciples has to be heard anew in the context of today’s challenges and assaults on civil human community. Both Isaiah’s experience of the presence and power of God in the Temple, and Simon Peter’s experience of the presence and power of God in Jesus’ mighty fishing expedition produced three things: a sense of awe; a sense of their own unworthiness to be in the presence of such unspeakable greatness; and then a sense of call.³

God encounters human beings not to condemn and terrify, but rather to transform, to encourage, and to send us to other people as bearers of light, and love and abundant life. When Isaiah proclaims he is unworthy, Isaiah is forgiven, emboldened, and given a word to deliver to God’s people. When Peter, confronted by God’s miraculous power in Jesus says, “Go away from me; I am a sinful man,” Jesus tells Peter not to fear and assures him that from now on, he will be catching people in the net of God’s mercy, grace and love.

The Call of God is laid upon the human heart of individuals but always with the purpose that we will go forth into our various communities with the mission of inviting others into the good work of God, for the building up of human community, to work together for the benefit of spreading God’s grace for the common good.

² Roxane Gay, “Why People Are So Awful Online,” *New York Times*, 7/7/2021.

³ *Texts for Preaching*, Cousar, Gaventa, McCann, Newsome, editors, Year C, p. 132.

If we are going to live into the grace of being the diverse and inclusive church God has called us to be in a world where more and more so-called community is found virtually and online, a big part of our calling has to be as basic as affirming the goodness that is possible, I dare say even miraculous – when people come together in person, when we incarnate the body of Christ together and find genuine community among and despite our differences.

My friend Patrick Johnson, Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Asheville, North Carolina, tells a story about how he learned the value of our call to nurture human community as a youth. When he was a teen, his family became a foster parent family. He had two brothers, so when you added in the three dogs it was already a full and active household. When he was thirteen years old, his family began providing foster care for one to three teenage boys. These were often children who were experiencing some level of emotional difficulty, and were leaving families who had all but given up on them. The foster boys would move in and usually stay with the Johnson family for one to three years, depending on their age and how well they fit in at their home. In addition to sharing the house and family life, Patrick and his brothers shared their rooms with these boys sleeping in bunk beds. Patrick says, “You can imagine the difficulty of trying to knit together three brothers and three foster brothers into one cohesive family. We were always fighting about something, and usually ganging up on each other in groups of two or three.

So my parents instituted a nightly practice at dinner to try to bring us together. Every night, after dinner, we would have what my mother called “IPR” time – interpersonal relationship time. Everyone had to take their dishes to the sink and come back to the table and sit down. The conversation began in a light-hearted way, and you could share things that you liked and that were going well and that you appreciated about each other. But pretty soon, the conversation would get down into the things that were not going well. That’s what this IPR time was really about: it was about airing the things that were creating conflict. One of

the boys took too long in the shower, for example, and made another late for school. Someone borrowed something and didn't put it back where it belonged. Someone else ate up all the chips. After each complaint, Patrick's mother – who acted as facilitator – would say to the named offender, “OK, Patrick, did you hear what Johnny was saying? Now, how would that make you feel?” To which the person being questioned would answer in a half-grunt, half-sentence.” And whenever she saw it coming, his mother would say, “And don't say it made you angry; I want you to go deeper.”

Patrick admits that by this point, all six teenaged boys around the table were sorry that anyone brought anything up because it just wasn't worth it. But, he says looking back now, “We had to stay at the table, and we had to learn to tell the truth, to understand, to forgive, to reconcile, and to love one another.”⁴

Friends, that is the kind of community God calls us to, and sends us out to fish for others in order to invite them into the household of God. A diverse, dynamic community where – amid all our differences and contentious divisions, we learn to tell the truth, to grow in understanding, to forgive, to reconcile, and to love one another. How else would we ever have the energy, or the imagination to do the good, life-giving work of God in the world.

Parker Palmer, who nurtured his spirit for the work of social change, said of the church as a people gathered: “Community is not opposed to conflict. On the contrary, community is precisely that place where an arena for creative conflict is protected by the compassionate fabric of human caring itself.”⁵

⁴ Patrick Johnson, “Conflict, Community, and Grace,” First Presbyterian, Asheville, NC, 8/19/18.

⁵ Palmer quote also from Patrick Johnson's sermon and found in full at www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings/community-conflict/

Of all the Gospel writers, Luke is the only one who connects Jesus' Call of the Disciples to a miracle – the miracle of fishing nets so full that the nets begin to break as the fish are hauled in. He tells Simon Peter – Let's go fish for people like that, and along follow James and John.

As we experience that call in this moment where often there is little evidence of civility in human community, perhaps God is not only calling us to the discipleship of evangelism, but also to join Jesus in making miracles – by telling the truth to one another, growing in understanding, forgiving one another, reconciling, and loving one another. All we have to do is leave all of our contested, contentious meanness behind, and follow Jesus.

AMEN.