

Annual Meeting February 10, 2019

Rector's Address/Sermon

The Rev. Dina van Klaveren

Gospel Text- Luke 5:1-11 The Message (An Interpretation by Eugene Peterson)

Once when he was standing on the shore of Lake Gennesaret, the crowd was pushing in on him to better hear the Word of God. He noticed two boats tied up. The fishermen had just left them and were out scrubbing their nets. He climbed into the boat that was Simon's and asked him to put out a little from the shore. Sitting there, using the boat for a pulpit, he taught the crowd. When he finished teaching, he said to Simon, "Push out into deep water and let your nets out for a catch." Simon said, "Master, we've been fishing hard all night and haven't caught even a minnow. But if you say so, I'll let out the nets." It was no sooner said than done—a huge haul of fish, straining the nets past capacity. They waved to their partners in the other boat to come help them. They filled both boats, nearly swamping them with the catch. Simon Peter, when he saw it, fell to his knees before Jesus. "Master, leave. I'm a sinner and can't handle this holiness. Leave me to myself." When they pulled in that catch of fish, awe overwhelmed Simon and everyone with him. It was the same with James and John, Zebedee's sons, coworkers with Simon. Jesus said to Simon, "There is nothing to fear. From now on you'll be fishing for men and women." They pulled their boats up on the beach, left them, nets and all, and followed him.

Address/Sermon:

Today in Luke's Gospel, we meet God, in the form of Jesus, as God meets a few regular working guys as they scrub clean their fishing nets after an unproductive night on the lake. They didn't even catch something to roast over a fire and eat for breakfast as they work to scrub and mend nets. What a frustration.

God meets us in our frustration.

In a moment of frustration, Jesus - God in human flesh- asks Simon Peter to take him out a little way in the boat so he can use it as a pulpit to preach Good News to the crowds mending and scrubbing nets.

God meets all the frustrated working fisherfolk as they go about their regular tasks, preaching and teaching.

Then, Jesus tells Simon Peter to go out and fish again. Give it another try. Simon Peter, who has never met this man before, resists a bit. It isn't logical. All the fishermen know this, and he looks like a fool for going out to fish at the wrong time of day - when there will be no fish to catch. And he agrees to give it another try. He listens to Jesus.

God meets us when we are resistant.

God meets us when we are impractical and hopeful and willing to give things another try.

Then, after catching a whole lot of fish, Peter falls on his knees before Jesus and says, I'm paraphrasing:

"I'm not worthy of your holy action in my little fisherman life!"

And Jesus says: "You are worthy enough to catch not only fish, you are worthy of catching an abundance of people with this Good News I bring."

And so, Simon Peter, and some other fishermen, leave those dirty nets for someone else to scrub – they leave the huge miraculous catch of fish - and they follow Jesus.

God does great and miraculous things, bringing about abundance, and tells us we are worthy of sharing that abundance of love and life and peace and joy with others. And so, still today, we follow where God leads.

We try different ways to grow our catch of fish as a congregation ... our catch of Good News people in these nets of ministry.

It's easier to measure a catch of fish than it is to measure a catch of people, isn't it?

Our nets are varied. We use this building, various programs, money, dinners, social media, community presence, music, blue mugs filled with goodies, our very selves - our daily interactions and spiritual growth.

Our volunteers and leaders provide a strong net, as do our committed and gifted staff members. Everywhere I turn I see strong and faithful leaders, who love God and love this congregation and our shared ministry.

We have flung our nets into the waters time and time again, trying new approaches to catching people with God's Good News. Some of these fishing efforts have yielded abundant catches. Most yields in ministry are hard to measure.

This past year we cast wide the net of Good News through engaging the concepts of Invite-Welcome-Connect ... distributing over 1000 goodie bags for the Community Center Truck or Treat event and over 30 warm welcome mugs to neighbors and friends in the community who may be interested in finding a faith home. And we are experimenting with a Saturday evening service once a month. Another idea that sprang from our Invite-Welcome-Connect work was concerts in Union Chapel, to invite neighbors into this beautiful, historic space.

This past year we cast wide the net of Good News through our Music program, raising funds from this generous congregation to purchase a fitting instrument – our lovely new piano! - for the Parish House, and gratefully receiving the new-to-us organ as a bonus. We saw the need to strengthen our experience of worship by hiring a Vocal Director. As a result, we are seeing modest numerical growth in the Chancel Choir, Worship Band, and Junior Choirs, and hearing vocal growth in our ability to lift every voice and sing God's praises. There is abundant song in this place - which is one of our ways of meeting God together.

This past year we cast wide the net of Good News through re-inventing the Christian formation offerings for youth, creating a calendar that balances classroom learning with outreach, bonding experiences and faith-filled activities. Last night, for example, 20 youth and 20 adults, mostly parents, gathered to hear the story of a holocaust survivor who lives nearby. My observation is that our young people are eager to explore challenging faith and justice issues, ready to serve others, and like to have fun together. Our young people are exploring how God meets us when we serve our neighbors, eat together, learn more about the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament, and get curious about God together.

This past year we cast wide the net of Good News by being transparent about the financial resources needed to do the kind of ministry we do as the people of God in this place. In the fall, you were invited to make a pledged financial commitment to our shared ministries for the first time, or to increase your previous pledge if you were able. And you have been generous. God meets us here, where we are honest about what ministry requires in volunteer time and various skillsets, and God meets us here in an experience of generosity and abundance when we state plainly what is needed financially.

Looking ahead, I pray for us to focus on two distinct (and seemingly opposing!) dreams:

Let us focus on being a sticky church, and let us focus on being a tidy church.

Yep, I'm dreaming of both a sticky church and a tidy church. This reminds me of the Sunday after Breakfast with St. Nick - a great success with lots of youth and community engagement - and I helped to clean up and set up and even still, came in to stand here and greet you with a glob of sticky pancake syrup a few inches in front of my right foot. That's not the kind of sticky church I'm dreaming of - although it does nicely illustrate my hope for a tidier church!

Let me explain: In his book Sticky Church, pastor Larry Osborne makes a case for congregations to focus not only on opening wide the front door - he makes a case for consciously closing the back door. In other words, meeting the needs of members within the congregation while also being open to grow with new members. I dream of being a stickier church, where there are opportunities to grow spiritually in fellowship with others - opportunities that meet people wherever they are in their faith journey, and at whatever level of time commitment they can make.

The whole point of this fishing for people and following Jesus enterprise is to become one with God and one with one another – which we see daily drawing us into a deeper experience freedom and peace. I dream of a congregation filled with folks who are exploring ways to deepen their experience of freedom in Christ, who know the deep peace of God. I'm dreaming of making the nets of our Good News fishing a bit stickier, like Velcro nets that hold us together, and keep us from slipping through the open spots. More ways for us to open our hearts to meet God together.

I also dream of being a tidier church. With all the activities and community groups and ministries using our spaces, we could really use a sexton- which is “Episcopalese” for building supervisor. The more users in this space - which is what the Parish House is designed for -

multiple community users - the messier it gets, and with more community users, we want to be sure it is presentable and welcoming and tidy. This is a challenge for us - growing the budget to staff appropriately for the level of care required. A lot of this falls on volunteers who notice things amiss and grab the broom, or come in late on a Saturday to set up for worship. You have refilled toilet paper rolls, vacuumed carpets, shoveled walkways, and a thousand other tasks that have tidied and maintained our space. We may continue to depend on volunteers to tidy up for a while longer, and yet, I pray that in the next few years we are able to hire a part-time sexton to maintain our lovely spaces for our needs such as worship and meetings and community dinners and junior choir and Education for Ministry - and for the continuing use by three scouting groups, Camp Inclusion, People Who Need People, counseling services, and more.

God is meeting us here, in this place, with these people, in this wider community. And God is meeting many others through our space, our ministry, our presence in the community. We meet God in our neighbors, and our neighbors meet God in us.

God urges us to cast our net and trust in God's abundance - to trust in God's ability to provide what is needed to follow where God leads us. In Luke's Gospel today, God provides abundantly, and fishermen follow. I wonder if it doesn't also work if we flip it - We follow, and God provides abundantly.

I'm honored to be following Jesus and trusting in God's abundant love with you for over ten years. I am honored to be your longest serving rector over these 39 years. I'm honored to see how God is meeting you, and me, in our daily lives, as we cast out the net again and again. I am excited about where we will meet God next, and I can't wait to see who will join us along the way as we follow Christ together.