

Getting Personal, Part 1:  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for February 10<sup>th</sup> 2019 (Fifth Sunday after Epiphany)  
by Foster Freed

Luke 5: 1-11

The season, in the life of the Church, that follows on the heels of the Epiphany—much like the Feast of the Epiphany itself—is a season in which we are invited to focus our attention upon the **revelation**...

...the closest synonym for the word epiphany is, in fact, the word revelation...

...this is the season, above all others, when we are invited to focus upon the revelation of the God who came to us in Jesus Christ. And so through these days we celebrate the revelation received by the magi. We celebrate the revelation that occurs on the occasion of Christ's baptism. We celebrate the revelation that takes place when Christ turns water into wine at Cana. And we will—a couple of Sundays from now—be invited to celebrate the grand and glorious revelation that takes place on Holy Mountain, when three of Christ's closest disciples behold the Transfiguration. Make no mistake about it: the season in which we find ourselves is one that presents us with continual opportunities to catch a glimpse of the living God in and through the One who came to us in the name of God, none other than this Jesus. A season of revelation.

How fitting then...how fitting that this is also the season in which we read—year in and year out—a handful of “call” stories: stories through which we learn of the calling of Christ's first small band of followers, his first small band of disciples. That is appropriate, in part, because each of these calls “to come and follow” represent a highly specific act of revelation, offered to particular persons in particular times and places. And the remembrance of such Gospel events is appropriate in this or any other season, because it is through such stories that the rubber hits the road for those of us, in this time and place, who call ourselves Christians, who regard ourselves as disciples. Consider!

Consider that the central actor in the book we call our own, is none other than God. That's true of the God who enters into covenant with ancient Israel in the pages of what we call the Old Testament; it is no less true of the God who is manifest through Jesus Christ in the pages of what we call the New Testament. God is the protagonist of our story. And yes: while it is true that we forget that at our peril...

...given the human tendency to want to imagine ourselves as occupying the spotlight in all times and places, it stands to reason that God's primacy and God's centrality continually need to be brought to our attention...

...while it is true that we easily forget but ought never to forget that God is the protagonist of the great Biblical story—and by extension, believe it or not, the protagonist of the lives we lead—we need also to be reminded that we are on board not as spectators but as participants in that story. That is why it is so good and proper and fitting that each of the four Gospels, early on in their telling of the story of Christ, present episodes in which the Gospel becomes wonderfully and terrifyingly personal. Personal to Simon Peter and to his brother Andrew. Personal to James and John the sons of Zebedee. Personal—as we'll hear next Sunday—to a man named Levi. And through them, personal for us as well. Personal to us both as individuals but also as the body of Christ gathered in this place. Getting personal. That's what happens whenever Christ encounters us. Not a generic call issued impersonally to anyone who happens to be in the vicinity. No! A highly personal call issued to each of us...and corporately issued together to all of us. For this time. For this place. For this people.

Then again.

\* \* \* \* \*

The call stories found in the opening sections of each of the four gospels show a great deal of variation, bearing the distinctive stamp of the four different Gospels. In Mark, the oldest of the Gospels, the call issued to the four fishermen—Peter, Andrew, James and John—is abruptly issued and abruptly answered; we're left puzzled as to why the four respond so quickly and without a trace of hesitation. Matthew—for his part—pretty much follows Mark's lead in this regard, whereas Luke and John take their own distinctive paths. In terms of John's Gospel, these call stories are located in that section of John in which the evangelist is trying to sort out the relationship between the movement started by John the Baptist and the movement subsequently started by Jesus. Not surprisingly, his telling of the call stories reflects that concern. But Luke, for his part tells a story—a variant of which seems to be found also in John's Gospel where it is located not at the start but at the very end of John, as part of John's telling of the Easter story...

...Luke tells a story that certainly does a better job than Mark or Matthew, of explaining **how** it was that the fishermen chose to follow Jesus in the first-place. As Luke recounts it, Jesus--having enlisted their assistance so that he could safely preach the Gospel from inside their boat—rewards the fishermen (when his preaching is completed) by inviting them to go back out on the lake. Peter notes the pointlessness of that exercise, given their lack of success the previous night. Obviously impressed by this Jesus, however, Peter agrees and—of course—the fish come in such abundance that it puts their boat (as well as a friend's boat) in danger of sinking. Hardly surprising, when they get back to shore, that all four of the fishermen seem more than happy to leave everything behind in order to follow Jesus. In short, Luke provides a powerful explanation as to why Peter, Andrew, James and John were willing to drop everything and follow Christ. In the process Luke also does one other thing...one other thing that is of special relevance to us, this morning. What is that other thing?

Well. As told by the third evangelist—as told by the shaper of the Gospel according to Luke—the story of the calling of Christ’s first disciples, must be understood as a story of abundance. A story about the abundance that was available back then and is presumably still available to us in and through the inconceivably abundant love that has come to us in Christ.

\* \* \* \* \*

Permit me to cut to the chase.

This morning the Trinity congregation is invited to remain after worship for the first of two meetings in which there will be an opportunity to ponder the year just past, as well as the challenges and opportunities that await. As we gather this morning and next Sunday morning, there are serious actualities that need to be addressed, including tight budgets that cannot help but alarm, as well as a Planned Giving fund that has (in my opinion) been well and properly used over the past six years, but a Planned Giving fund that is not getting any larger: at least not presently. And so there are very real and very appropriate concerns about the challenges that face Trinity...challenges that must be addressed in an adult way. Please don’t think for a minute that I am about to diminish our need to be sober...to be realistic...to see things as they actually are. But here’s the problem.

Because we human beings seem to be hard-wired to be “apprehensive” about the future...

...our survival likely depends upon that particular aspect of our hard-wiring...

...because we human beings seem to be hard-wired to be “apprehensive” about the future, I think we have a tendency to focus on the challenges before us in a way that causes us to be oblivious to the resources—the abundance of resources—with which those challenges might be met. That’s true of most human beings...and we here, at TU, are certainly not an exception to that pattern. And no: I am not merely speaking of the spiritual abundance offered to us as lavishly as it was offered to those fisherman lowering their nets into the Sea of Galilee two millennia ago, the gifts of bread and cup on the table quietly testifying to God’s desire to feed and nurture us! But no!

...I speak as well of the tangible abundance available to this congregation through the resource found in the energy and commitment of its members, as well as the resource found in this physical plant, a physical plant this faith-community shares with the Trinity Catholic congregation. And I am convinced...utterly convinced...that the challenge going forward from here won’t be the lack of resources; the challenge going forward will be the painstaking work...

...and it will be painstaking work...

...to reach agreement as how best to utilize the abundance that is here in this place and amongst this people. That will not happen overnight...but it can happen...with patience...with determination...with a willingness to “reason together”...and—of course—through the leading of Christ and the Spirit, who are every bit as capable of astonishing us here and now...as they were capable of astonishing Simon and Andrew, James and John, 2000 years ago in the midst of a church and in the midst of a world—trust me on this—a church and a world that faced no fewer challenges than the church and the world we inhabit today.

Friends in Christ. With our feet firmly planted on the ground and with our eyes wide open to the actuality of the challenges this congregation presently face: may we also be equipped to see with the eyes of our hearts...and with those eyes and with those hearts to delight in the good and gracious things God is preparing for us in such great abundance. And may we thereby be given the courage to move into the future, as those stamped with the conviction that whatever life may bring our way: we are not alone, we live in God’s world.

Thanks be to God!