

**Commencement Address**  
**Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary**  
**May 18, 2007**  
**Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11**

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON,  
AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.  
AMEN.**

When a systematic theologian sets out to preach on a story about St. Peter at a seminary commencement, one might expect that the lesson would be the story of Peter's Confession in St. Matthew's Gospel. That text is indeed a theologian's playground: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." "Flesh and blood did not show you this, but my Father who is in heaven." "On this rock I will build my Church." "Get behind me, Satan."

By contrast, our present text may seem less obviously "theological." It may indeed seem a somewhat "pietistic" text, focused more on "experience" than doctrine, on Peter's feelings than Peter's confession of faith.

I believe that such a "pietistic" reading of this lesson would be off the mark on most points, but one point it gets right. This story does indeed indicate that in Christianity *there is something more fundamental than theology, and something more fundamental than ministry*. And it's that claim I want to ponder with you today.

This not Peter's first encounter with Jesus. In Chapter 5, Jesus teaches in the synagogue at Capernaum, and casts out a demon who identifies Jesus as "the Holy One of God." "Astonishment," awe and dread, come upon all the people and they say to themselves: "What sort of word is this? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits and they come out!" According to St. Luke, Jesus afterwards goes directly from the synagogue to "Simon's house," and this is the first mention of Simon Peter in the Gospel. Peter's mother-in-law is sick, and Jesus "rebukes" her fever, just as he had "rebuked" the unclean spirit; the fever leaves her, "and then she got up and served them."

Interestingly, however, St. Luke gives us no insight into Peter's reaction to either the exorcism in the synagogue or the healing in his own house. What happens in our lesson is in itself no more wondrous than those earlier events, but it's on *this* occasion, not those, that Peter is, so to speak, "hooked," taken hold of, grabbed by the scruff of the neck and shaken.

In our story, Jesus, perhaps taking advantage of prior acquaintance, commandeers Peter's fishing boat for a pulpit. When the sermon is over, Jesus turns to Peter and says: "Put out into the deep water, and let down your nets for a catch."

Now tarry for a moment and take in this scene. Peter and his companions were already washing their nets, cleaning up after a night's work, when Jesus first borrowed the boat. Now the sermon is over, and here Jesus is telling them to get out all their gear and start all over again. Peter's immediate response, according to one great preacher on this text, is "exactly what a fisherman would be likely to say to a carpenter from Nazareth, that came down to teach him his business" (Alexander Maclaren).

Fishing, after all, is what Peter does for a living. It was not a hit-or-miss business, either, but a trade with its own lore and its own forms of expertise. There were *reasons* why Galilean fishermen worked at night, not during the day. There was no reason to think that dragging the nets through fish-free water would produce better results in the daytime than it had all the previous night.

So Peter's first reaction — "You know, we've worked like dogs all night long and haven't caught a thing" — is perfectly reasonable, but it also sets him at a place where the road divides. How much could you or I blame him if he had thought to himself: "Look, religion is religion, and fish is fish. Let this guy do the theology; I'll take care of the fishing, thank you very much." Could *we* sit in judgment on Peter if that had been his answer?

But Peter did not react that way. His words are tempered and framed by something beyond his knee-jerk reaction at being told his business by a preacher. "*Master,*" he says, "we have worked all night long and we haven't caught a thing. *But if you say so,* I will let down the nets."

The extra factor at work here is Peter's perception of Jesus' *authority*. He apparently did learn something from the strange doings in the synagogue, and the healing that took place in his house. After Jesus expelled the unclean spirit, the people asked: "What sort of word is this?" Peter seems to have gotten the point that Jesus' word is worth listening to: "*If you say so,* I'll let down the nets."

This is how *faith* is consistently presented in the Gospels. Faith begins with *perception*, the perception that Jesus is a person worth listening to, a person who makes things happen. Faith begins with the recognition that Jesus speaks and acts "with authority and power." Faith therefore takes form concretely as *obedience*, the *practical* recognition of Jesus' authority and power.

Now, lest Lutherans be traumatized, let me hasten to say that obedience in this context is not a meritorious good work. It's a simple matter of *getting the point* about Jesus. "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and do not do what I tell you?" asks Jesus. "What part of 'Lord' don't you understand? You've seen enough to *say* it: what good reason do you have for not following through?"

Remember that the person whose faith Jesus praises most highly is commended for getting just this point. The centurion who sought healing for his servant was a Gentile. Of all the characters in the Gospels, he's the least likely to have had any theological resources at hand to make sense of Jesus, and in fact he has no theological words to say. Roman soldiers were not known for clear ideas about the divine, but one thing the centurion did know was *authority*. He had been under it, he had exercised it, and he knew it when he saw it: "Just say the word, sir, and let my servant be healed." It was that *perception* that Jesus praised: "'I tell you, even in Israel I have not found such faith.'"

In our story, Peter has come far enough along to know that Jesus is worth listening to: "*If you say so*, I'll let down the nets." This isn't exactly bold, we're a long way from the Peter of Acts, flinging his confidence in Jesus in the teeth of the Council, but he's seen enough to take some trouble on a weary morning. He acts on what he has seen, however great or little that may have been, puts out again to the deep water, and lets down the nets.

And then things get out of control. The fish, who had been conspicuous by their absence all night long, start throwing themselves into the nets in droves, or perhaps we should say in "schools," so that the nets start to break and the other boat has to come out to help. Even then the fish just keep on coming and both boats are nearly swamped.

This is the point at which *The Thing* happens to Peter, and here I want to translate rather literally:

Seeing, however, Simon Peter fell down at Jesus' knees, and said:  
"Go away from me, for I am a sinful man, Lord."

This is where I have to disagree with certain readings of this text that I have called "pietistic." Some of the old commentators and preachers want to make Peter's sense of his own sinfulness the pivot of this text, and interpret it in terms of an *experience of penitence*.

But the Peter who walks away from this story is surely very far from having faced

up to his own sinfulness in any life-changing way. In fact, he still suffers from a deplorable lack of self-doubt. According to St. Matthew, he takes it upon himself to rebuke Jesus for talking about the cross; he intrudes his babbling into the holy mystery of the Transfiguration — where he is just resoundingly *ignored* — he even boasts about his own faithfulness at the Last Supper, and then ... denies the very Lord at whose knees he had once fallen.

There are clues in the story too: it's surely odd that Peter says, "Go *away* from me," when generally, repentant sinners are found begging Jesus *not* to go away. Moreover, St. Luke uses the same word used about the "going away" of the unclean spirit a few lines earlier. It's as though Peter, lacking the mobility of the demon, unable to clear out as efficiently, asks Jesus if this time he won't just go away instead.

No, this story is not about what Peter learned about himself — *it's about what he saw in Jesus*. The key word is the one that St. Luke makes the first word in the verse: "*Seeing*, then, Peter fell down..." The point, once again, is *perception*.

Peter says "Go away from me, for I am a sinful man" because he has had the good fortune to be brought up a Jew, and he knows that sinful flesh and blood cannot endure the presence of the Holy One. He knows the words of the Prophet that we have just heard: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Peter also knows God's own word to Moses: "No human being shall see me and live." His words about his sinfulness are a good Israelite reflex reaction; awe and dread have come upon him, and as at the Transfiguration, he is babbling.

It's what he's *seen* that makes him babble. In the face of what has just happened, things start to come overwhelmingly together. Peter has no words yet for what he has seen in Jesus but instinctively he associates it with the intolerable glory of the Lord God of Israel. In her play cycle on the life of Christ Dorothy L. Sayers presents Peter reminiscing about this event some months later in conversation with the other disciples. "I lost my head," Peter says:

... it seemed so queer, and I was tired, and I fell on my knees and said: "Sir, go away and leave us — I'm a sinful, common man, and I can't bear it" .... Of course, that's nothing to the things we've seen since: but I'll never quite get over that first moment — the sun on the sea, and the fish leaping and shining, and the shock of knowing that he

wasn't — that he wasn't *ordinary* (112-113).

That hits very close to the bulls-eye, I believe. It also hits squarely the thesis I announced earlier: that in Christianity *there is something more fundamental than theology and something more fundamental than ministry*. That more fundamental thing is *perception*, the perception of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, the realization that Jesus isn't ... “ordinary.”

Such perception is faith at its root. Faith is not blind; it *sees*: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we *beheld* his glory.” That beholding is a divine mystery: “I do not have faith in Jesus Christ, my Lord, by my own reason or strength, but the Holy Spirit has ...enlightened me...” What Jesus says about Peter's confession is just as true of what Peter sees here, just as true of whatever it was he had seen in Jesus after the Capernaum exorcism and the healing of his mother-in law: flesh and blood did not show these things to Peter, but the Father in heaven.

Without this seeing, theology will be a game, and ministry will be all about exercising power or being admired or having the biggest numbers in the synod or just living a quiet life. You'll understand that I am not downplaying theology: when Peter enters into the fullness of his apostolic office in Acts, we find that his ministry requires quite a lot of very careful theological discourse. But the beginning and the basis is here, in this gospel lesson, in Peter's overwhelming realization that Jesus is not... not ordinary.

It's now that I get to exercise my prerogative and lay some words on the graduates. I have only two points to make.

1. All of you are going forth from here to Christian life and ministry, as pastors, as diaconal ministers, as lay church professionals, or as theologically educated lay persons serving Christ in your various congregations and vocations. In your time at the Seminary, you have doubtless learned many things, but I hope above all that you have had occasion for *perception*. I hope this, but I also expect that it's true: that in some class, or in some conversation, or at some chapel service – when you were studying the lives and words of Christians of the past, or exegeting Holy Scripture, or learning about the practice of ministry, or even wading through theology assignments – at some point, the sun peeked through the clouds, the world lit up in a strange way, and it dawned on you that Jesus is not... not ordinary.

My first word of counsel, then, is simply this: *remember that you saw that*. Don't

try to recapture the *feeling*: that's totally unimportant. Even if you can't remember just exactly *what* you saw, even if you've not quite mastered the theological language needed to *describe* what you saw – *remember that you saw it*. Remember that it once dawned on you that Jesus Christ of Nazareth is more than you can handle, that we have no methodological nets or ecclesiastical boats that can hold all that he is and all that he means. Remember that you saw that, once – *and don't settle for a smaller Jesus*.

We live among all kinds of pressures to scale Jesus down, to shoehorn him into categories familiar and easy to us. We are glad to have him tell us things we already know: that God is accepting, that we should remember those in need, that the Church should be compassionate and caring. We don't mind him motivating us to do the things we already know we should be doing. We are delighted to make him into a symbol of our highest aspirations and our best ideals. But some time or other, I'd be willing to bet, here or elsewhere, in class or at worship, it has dawned on you that Jesus is more than any of that. Whether that perception was weak or strong, articulate or inarticulate, *remember that you saw that*, and *don't settle*.

Be *unsettled*. Seek the Jesus of the high and holy titles: Word made flesh, Image of the invisible God, slain Lamb ordained before the foundation of the world. In Sayers' play, at the cross, the Blessed Virgin prophesies and says of her crucified Son: "This is reality. From the beginning of time until now, this is the only thing that has ever really happened." Somewhere inside, each of you has reason to suspect that those words are true, even though none of us can say adequately what they mean. Whether you've perceived only what Peter had perceived when our lesson begins, or whether you've been gob-smacked like Peter at the end of our story, you've seen *something* – so *remember that*, and don't settle for a smaller Jesus.

My second – and last – word is like unto the first: *the way from perception to perception is the way of obedience*. In our story, Peter is not in control of what he sees about Jesus: "flesh and blood did not show you this." What Peter does do – by the grace of God – is *act* on what he *has* seen. He *has* seen Jesus do some remarkable things, so he gathers his nets again and gets back on the boat and heads out to the deep waters – because Jesus says so.

You are going out into a religious world in which you will be surrounded by the clever talk of clever people who know better than Jesus. In this day and time, Jesus's command would not only run counter to Peter's own experience as a fisherman. Peter today would be bombarded by studies commissioned by the

Division for Fishing in Jerusalem, conclusively showing that today's fish are increasingly too sophisticated to be caught by old fashioned net-methods, and that the Church must secure its future by creative use of new technologies: in other words, dynamite 'em.

You, my friends, *are* Peter now, and it's you that stand at the place where the roads divide. And this is my parting shot: every one of you has seen enough to just *go ahead and do what the man says*, despite all the clever talk and all the clever people. "Whoever serves me, must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also." "If anyone wants to be my disciple, let them take up their cross daily and follow me." "Go, make disciples by baptizing and teaching." "Do this in remembrance of me."

Lay or ordained, professional or non-professional, serving God in the institutions of the church or out in the world — every day you will stand at the place where the broad road and the narrow road divide. Think; remember; don't forget what you've seen: you know better than to be clever. You've seen enough to know that you'd better do it his way.

On this day of all days, in the presence of my own preaching teacher who celebrates his last graduation among us as an active faculty member, I have to ask myself: have I preached the gospel, or have I just laid a lot on law on you?

What I have said would probably be sheer law if it weren't for one thing: *it's all true about Jesus*. He *does* speak with authority and power, and the demons from hell and the fish in the sea all obey him. He *has* promised us power from on high, the Spirit sent from the Father. All authority in heaven and on earth *have* been given to him, and he *has* vowed to be with us until the end of the age. I am not calling you to be a hero or to prove something to God: just to deal with reality, deal with the scriptural Christ; as St. Paul says, "reckon" with what you know. For has Jesus himself not told you that if you believe, you will see the glory of the Lord?

Therefore to him, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be blessing and honor and glory and might, now and forevermore. Amen.

David S. Yeago