

Pastor Bob Bronkema's Sermon Text for Holly Miller's Ordination at FPC Strasburg - June 27, 2021

Isaiah 6:5-7, Luke 5:1-11 **"Ordination of Holly Miller"**

Many of you have heard this story before, but it is fitting for what we will address in our Scriptures. When I began my pastorate we were missionaries with the PC(USA) in Italy and I helped to coordinate an ecumenical service with Protestant, Catholics, Pentecostals, Orthodox and Anglican clergy participating. I was to go first and inevitably you begin by saying: The peace of the Lord be with you, and the congregation would respond by saying: And also with you.

It was moments from when the service was supposed to start and I noticed that the microphone was not working the way that it was supposed to and since it was the beginning of the service I thought I could correct the situation. So I went up to the microphone and everyone in this huge cathedral stood up and I said: There is something wrong with this thing, and the congregation responded, and also with you.

But that is why we are gathered here today to see how our Scripture identifies our primary and principal step in ordination and I would even say in our Christ life is to be able to say there is something dreadfully wrong with this thing, there is something wrong with us, or in the words of Simon: "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man."

READ Pray with me...

Luke 5:1-11 is earmarked with the title Jesus calls his first disciples and it is often paired with Paul's explanation of his own calling in I Corinthians 15 as he made his way to Damascus where he recognizes his sinfulness, even inadequacy as he states: "last of all, as one untimely born, he appeared to me." It is matched with the calling of the prophet Isaiah in chapter 6 where he states: "Wo is me. I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips."

In reality the disciples today have it easy in their call narratives because none is struck blind, none has a burning coal placed on their lips, rather they are rewarded with two boats full of fish. But all of our callings, whether it be to ordained ministry or to a vocation within the secular world, must be approached by a recognition of unworthiness which can only be remedied by the presence and the blood of Jesus Christ.

Our Scripture today gives us a wonderful, what shall we call it, how about a wonderful dance where the authority of Jesus is revealed and that in turn elicits a response of kenosis, a complete self-emptying state of preparedness on the part of the disciple.

Let's look at Luke 5:1-11, it begins by describing Jesus' early ministry, even before the disciples are called, as one where people were flooding to him and press against him so that they could hear the Word of God. We are called Ministers of the Word and Sacrament. It is here where we are reminded that our primary task is to preach the Word of God. This is the first time this phrase is used in Luke. In fact Luke uses it 4 times in his Gospel and 14 times in Acts while Mark only has it once and John once as well. So for Luke this phrase Word of God is important, he uses it 18 times when it is only used 2 other times in Scripture. And each time that Luke uses it in the Gospel he refers to Jesus' teachings.

I'll never forget a Festival of Homiletics conference that I went to and there was Renita Weems staring down at an audience of over 1,000 clergy and this diminutive lay person in her timid yet full of authority voice looked out at us and beseeched us, Just preach Jesus.

This is how Peter is introduced to Jesus today as he teaches from one of his borrowed fishing boats that had been on the shore after a full night of unsuccessful fishing. I love the details of Luke. The nets are out of the boats drying in the early morning sun and Jesus comes along and asks for a little help. What happens in vs. 4 is crucial to understanding how we end up with a repentant Simeon who embarks on his own life journey today as a called disciple.

Jesus finishes teaching, Jesus the carpenter's boy from that Podunk town in the Southern End, on the other side of the tunnel, called Nazareth, from which nothing good comes out. This Jesus leans over to Peter, the professional fisherman who has been up all night to no avail trying to catch fish and was kind enough to let you use his boat as a pulpit, hey, why don't you try throwing the net over there. You know, that 150 pound net that is drying in the sun for another day, put it back on the boat in front of all these people gathered and throw it out over there. Go ahead.

Now I don't want to say that Simon whines, but we've been up all night and didn't get a thing. Why should Simon listen to this guy he has just met and do something he probably would never do for anyone else? His answer gives it away. How does he respond to Jesus? He addresses Jesus as Master, only Luke uses this term for a disciple describing our Savior. All the others use didaskolon, teacher, or rabbouni, rabbi. But the term Master helps us to understand that Peter had already conferred upon Jesus a certain authority that previously he did not have.

Master, it's been a long night, **but because you have said so**, I'll try it. Peter recognizes a certain authority in Jesus even in this first stage of their relationship.

There is a huge difference between power and authority. Jesus could have forced or made Peter throw his net and he would have exercised his power. When we served as

missionaries in Russia the police would stand at intersections or in the middle of the road and wield their black and white checkered night sticks. If they pointed that stick at you as you were driving by, you stopped no matter where you were going or the urgency that you had in going to that place. Immediately you pulled over.

They had the power because you didn't want to pull over, you didn't want the exchange where they would demand an expediency fee, but the power came from the gun on their side and the threat of deportation for any foreigner who didn't obey the mighty stick. That is power. Max Weber in his book *Social and Economic Organization* states that power is the ability to coerce. When you have the ability to coerce someone to obey you, like that policeman in Moscow, then you have power.

But authority, well, that is different. If I obey because I want to, if I sense legitimacy in the one who is asking me to do something, that person has authority.

The world says you have to have power because that is the only way you can win.

You say you can't stand up against tyranny with sacrificial love but in the end it is the only thing that really does work. In WWII they rounded up the Jews in the city of Sophia, the capital of Bulgaria. They headed down to the train station the train had pulled up and at 11pm they were supposed take the Jews down to Auschwitz. In this barbed wire enclosure they were weeping and wailing because they knew their destiny. It was a rainy and foggy night. Out of the rain and out of the fog came Metropolitan Kirill, the leader of the Orthodox Church. He stood 2 meters tall to start with but the orthodox priests wear that miter which gives them an extra foot. Imagine this enormous figure striding out of the darkness and out of the fog with his black robes and his white beard hanging down over his robes with about 400 people of his townspeople marching behind him.

They say that his stride was so great and his gait so long that men had to run to keep up with him. He got to the entrance of the barbed wire enclosure. The men of the parish surrounded the barbed wire enclosure with the Jews enclosed. Metropolitan Kirill got to the entrance and the guards pointed their guns at him, and he said to the SS, step aside, they said you can't go in there Father and he said step aside. And he marched in there among the Jews as the soldiers shouted if you go in there we will not let you out.

He raised his arms and quoted one verse of Scripture and changed the destiny of a nation. What verse? As he stood among the Jewish people, the leader of the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria, raised his hands and yelled, from the Book of Ruth, wither soever thou goest, I will go.

Your people will be my people, and your God will be my god. And the Jews cheered, and the Christians on the other side of the barbed wire cheered.

And the uproar was so great that people came running out of their houses and they came running down to the train station and hundreds grew into thousands and the SS troopers got on their train and left and never came back again. Not a single Bulgarian Jew ever died in a Nazi concentration camp because a man was willing to sacrifice himself in love.

The world says you have to have power to win in our political divisions, to win against hostile countries, to enact revenge against your enemies. Jesus tells us you have to have the type of authority that comes from being willing to wash feet and die on a cross. Simon already sensed that Jesus had that authority.

So when he threw his net and caught the fish, yelled for help and was to the point of almost sinking two boats, he realized who called him and what his calling was. At this point it is not Simon's skills that are at issue, the issue is his life, his obedience to the Savior which will in turn make him in the old school words: I will make you fishers of men. We might expect Peter to defend his credibility as a fisherman rather than apologize for his sinfulness, but when he realizes the authority of Jesus, nothing else matters.

The story finishes as you would expect with the contrite Peter in front of our Savior asking for Jesus to not waste his time with him for he is not worthy. We find the same approach in Luke repeated over and over again. Mary earlier states I am the handmaiden of the Lord when confronted with her calling. John the Baptist professed that he is unworthy to even untie Jesus' sandal, the centurion in chapter 7 tells Jesus: "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof." The Lord likes that approach.

Our reaction to the presence of Jesus who is calling us to a specific task Luke tells us should be one of unashamed servitude to the master. But who takes that approach these days? Not the fraternity and sorority of pastors with our minimum salaries and our 6 weeks of vacation, okay two of them should be study leave, not with our free golf on Mondays and the tax breaks that make an accountant blush.

Ordination is not a status symbol, it is a reminder of our unworthiness and our call to be the least of these in a society and a culture looking to get ahead. We live in a country where our Christian faith is used as a pawn to get votes by claiming to be a Presbyterian from Manhattan or a Catholic from Delaware. Our faith has been a source of power, of coercion ever since a guy named Constantine walked the earth.

But Simon here recognizes Jesus' authority and he was willing to leave it all behind to follow him, for a life of complete sacrifice. The humility it takes to do that is required of us all. This church, this Presbytery, this nation, even this denomination could learn from those who have left all to serve. May God bless us and keep us as we look to fulfill all of our callings with an inexhaustible source of humility. Amen.