

***A sermon preached on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019 based upon Luke 5:1-11.***

If I were to ask you what it feels like to be a human being there are a whole range of possible ways you could answer.

If we were to ask what this story we just heard says about what it feels like to be a human being I think the majority of the story paints a hard, bleak picture -- one with which I suspect most of us at least some of the time can identify.

Apart from Jesus the primary character is Simon who will later get his name changed by Jesus to Peter. Simon lives by the Sea of Galilee and makes his living as a fisherman. He has a boat and a net and there are other fishermen who work with him, most notably the brothers James and John. The best time to catch fish is at night so that's when they go out in the boats and let down their nets. It must have been so dark some nights that they couldn't see a thing but they've done this so many times it doesn't really matter.

If their luck is good by the end of the night they will have caught quite a few fish so that when they get back on shore they can set aside a portion for their own family and then sell the rest to the other people in town.

It's hard, physical labor that leaves them exhausted, and some nights like the one after which Jesus showed up for reasons wholly out of their control their luck is lousy and they catch no fish at all.

But even though they have no fish to show for their efforts and they are exhausted and just want to go home to get some rest, each morning the job is not complete until they have done the boring job of cleaning their nets because the nets are the essential tool of their trade and if they don't clean them the nets will quickly deteriorate and become useless.

And that is what they are doing when Jesus happens to come along.

So one thing we can say from this story about what it feels like to be a human is to know **tedium**. There is a significant portion of life that is simply tedious – certain tasks we have to do day in and day out that aren't particularly interesting or inherently gratifying – indeed, that can feel downright boring – tasks that nonetheless have to be done to survive in this world.

Another thing our story tells us about being a human is that because of all that has to be gotten done we often feel fatigued – utterly exhausted -- and sometimes this fatigue leaves us irritable which is the impression you get with Simon's initial response to Jesus' directive to put his boat out yet again into the deep waters and lower his nets once more.

*“Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.”*

Along with irritation you get the impression that life for Simon often included feelings of despair and hopelessness – the thought that in spite of how hard we work we aren't getting ahead, we're not making progress – that in fact we're actually losing ground.

As an aside, this particular feeling has been spoken of a lot recently in the American conversation – the sense that what we call the “American Dream” is slipping away – the notion that if you work hard and play by the rules your life will steadily get better. For many people that no longer seems to be the case.

There is another thing the story says about what it feels like to be a human being that is revealed by Simon’s initial response to the miracle that occurs when after grudgingly following Jesus’ directive to once more let down his nets into the deep water to his great amazement this time his nets are filled with more fish than he had ever caught before.

Simon falls down before Jesus and cries,

*“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinner!”*

The word “sinner” is a loaded word.

When I was in high school I turned away from Christianity and probably the first reason for this was that in a difficult time in my life I didn’t experience a lot of love in my home church, though love was probably there and somehow I felt cut off from it.

But another big reason I turned away was this notion of “sin”. It seemed like a word used to hit people over the head with:

*“You’re a sinner! You should feel bad about yourself!”*

I suspect that to this day the most common way the word “sinner” is understood is as a term used for someone who has done bad things that require forgiveness by God.

Although there definitely *are* actions that can and should be called “sinful” and need forgiveness I don’t think this is the most helpful way to understand what sin means.

It lends itself to dividing people up into two categories of “sinners” and “non-sinners” because on a surface level some people obviously do a lot more “bad” things than others.

The people Jesus most often hung out with were the ones labelled “sinners”, a fact for which he was routinely criticized by the Pharisees – the ones who located themselves squarely in the “non-sinner” category.

One of the precepts of Christianity is the notion that we *all* are sinners, and if that means we all should be feeling badly about ourselves then, as I thought in my youth, *the heck with that!*

We can assume that in his life Peter had done some so-called “bad” things in his life along the lines of getting irritable and losing his temper and saying things he regretted.

But I think we can probably give Simon the benefit of the doubt and assume that he wasn’t a secret murderer, thief, or adulterer – that he did a decent job of following the Ten Commandments.

So when he dramatically falls to his knees and cries out, *“Depart from me, Lord for I am a sinner!”* it seems unlikely that what he meant was, *“Depart from me, Lord because sometimes I have a problem controlling my temper!”*

Like Simon, by nature and upbringing I'm not the sort of guy who routinely goes around breaking the Ten Commandments, at least the most obvious ones. *(If this self-revelation catches your curiosity, go back and read them to try and figure out what I'm talking about.)*

I'm not sure I would be a Christian today if I hadn't encountered a different understanding of what sin means in a religion class I took in college. It's the understanding you've heard me refer to routinely when at the beginning of the service I proclaim the "Good News" and initiate the passing of the peace, telling you the walls have come down: that sin as "separation."

Before sin is a particular sinful act we commit it is a state of being in which we feel ourselves to be cut off from God, cut off other human beings, and cut off, in fact from our truest self.

This was something I could relate to. If there was a God who loved me, I didn't feel connected to this God. I had friends but there were times when in spite of those friends I felt lonely, I felt a self-consciousness that cut me off from others, I felt unable fully be at ease and be myself. There still are such times.

The thing about this state of separation is that you can't overcome it with a simple act of will, which is what Christianity has classically always said about sin. If all you had to do to overcome sin was to try harder, well, the Pharisees had it right and there was no need for a savior.

This sense of separation is tied to the unavoidable gravitational pull of self-centeredness that is a part of all of our lives, this state in which we ourselves are routinely the central reference point by which we gauge everything.

We can tell ourselves: *"I shouldn't be so self-centered,"* and sometimes that *is* a good thing to tell ourselves, but the thing about telling ourselves not to be self-centered is that our focus is still on ourselves: *"How am I doing in not thinking about myself all the time?"*

Another aspect of this feeling of separation is that on some level we know that there is a gap between the "me" I am presenting to the world and the "me" I feel inside – that they two at times are quite different.

We try and present this image to the world of somebody who more or less has it together, who is basically respectful of and kind to others.

But sometimes on the inside the feelings and thoughts that overtake us seem like a stinking cesspool of pettiness, lust, fear, greed, anger, self-absorption, self-pity, despair and of all sorts of judgments rendered – of others but also of ourselves. And there is this thought that arises sometimes: *if people really knew me – really knew the cesspool of thoughts and feelings that race through my head – they could never love me.*

We find ourselves in such a state and somebody asks us, *"How're you doing?"* and we answer, *"Fine, just fine."*

And so we lie, because it feels like if we actually put into words our truth of the moment the person would run in horror from us. That, at its worst is what the separation that is sin feels like and I suspect it was what Simon was feeling that day.

Except in this instance Simon suddenly realized that he was in the presence of someone from whom he could not hide his inner darkness -- which, I think explains Simon's response to the miraculous catch of fish that Jesus makes happen. First Simon is awestruck, which is to say that he suddenly realizes the man standing next to him is more than a mere man – that in some mysterious sense he is standing in the very presence of God, the Holy of holies. It is in this recognition that Simon falls to his knees and cries, *“Lord, depart from me for I am a sinner!”*

So to summarize what this story says on the negative side about what it feels like to be a human being: to be human is to feel at times a great sense of tedium and exhaustion out of which we sometimes lash out at others, out of which we sometimes feel a sense of hopelessness about the future. To be human is to sometimes feel like we're trapped inside ourselves with a cesspool of dark feelings and thoughts racing through our heads that we would be ashamed to have anybody else listening in on, a fact that cuts us off from getting truly close to others.

To be human is to feel at times a profound sense of unworthiness.

So now we come to the striking finale of our story this morning.

Sometimes with our preconceptions we miss exactly what takes place. With Simon having declared himself a sinner, you might expect Jesus to say, *“Your sins are forgiven,”* but he doesn't do that because the sin we're talking about here isn't really about particular bad things Simon has done; it is about the great chasm that Simon feels separating himself from God.

Jesus calls Simon to follow him, to embrace a new vocation. From now on Simon won't be catching fish; he'll be catching people.

Again, notice that Jesus doesn't say what we might expect, *“Listen up, I've got a new job for you, but first you're going to have to clean up your act if you want to do this job.”*

As the story progresses we will see that there will be a transformation that takes place in Simon but it will take place slowly over time, with many stumblings along the way. These various dark feelings I've described as part of being a human being – they didn't automatically cease to be a part of Simon's experience when he became a follower of Jesus. Simon's worst inner cesspool experience is still to come – the infamous night of Jesus' arrest.

Jesus sees what Simon thinks of as his cesspool, but Jesus sees something deeper than the cesspool, and that is that Simon is made in the image and likeness of God, that Simon is a beloved child of God, that Simon can be a vessel of God's Spirit, that Simon has gifts for ministry he has no knowledge of.

What does God see when God looks at us, and what do we see?

God sees everything, so God sees the cesspool part, but God also sees other things.

God sees the gifts God has given us to bless this world with – gifts we may not have a clue about.

God sees a self with the capacity to engage life deeply, joyfully, lovingly, a self that can be an open vessel of the Holy Spirit.

And therein lies the new possibility the story tells us of what it can feel like to be a human being: To be a human being can include the wonder of experiencing grace -- that even though I may feel at times like a “wretch” as the old hymn declares, God has come to me to claim me as a beloved child.

To be a human includes the possibility that the things that once felt like nothing but tedium can be turned into times to commune with God.

I heard about this Chinese Christian who was imprisoned in horrific conditions. He volunteered for the worst job -- daily cleaning the latrines -- because in spite of the stench the job provided a solitude in which he could enter deeply into prayer.

Can you imagine this?

Perhaps a part of your tedium involves interacting with people who are total strangers to you, or people who are distinctly unpleasant.

Can you imagine this tedium being transformed as an opportunity to “fish for people” – show them the grace of love?

In a curious way, the ongoing humanity of Simon is a crucial part of his effectiveness as a vessel of the Spirit.

*“Listen folks, I know what life feels like for you sometimes. I’ve been there. Sometimes I still go there. But I am here to tell you about a love that has been revealed in this man Jesus that is healing those gaps in my soul.*

*“I’m just one beggar telling another beggar where to find food.*

*“And I know how life feels hopeless sometimes. But I’ve discovered a surprising God who sometimes suddenly fills nets full of fish, sometimes opens doors that have always been shut, and opens new doors we hadn’t even known were there.*

*“If God can use somebody as imperfect as myself, God can surely use you as well.”*