

Epiphany 5C Communion

Isaiah 6:1-13

1 Cor 15:1-11

Luke 5:1-11

"Show and Tell"

We are in the season of Epiphany and this is the last Sunday of Epiphany before we begin the transformative time of Lent. As a pastor, and as someone who uses words all the time for my work, I think it is important we know the meaning of words.

Epiphany is a God-inspired understanding or appearance which immediately deepens our relationship with God.

In today's readings, we see several different forms of epiphanies:

Isaiah's mystical and fantastic encounter with the Holy of Holies;

Peter, James and John's spectacular catch of fish at the command of Jesus;

and Paul's testimony of his faith and what God means to him.

It would probably have made sense to speak about what an Epiphany is at the beginning of Epiphany rather than at the end, but I am learning as well.

Be that as it may, if we want to understand an Epiphany, we can look to our readings today to see what they are like and also what they mean.

In each of our examples, the primary impact of an Epiphany is the witness and testimony of that experience to others.

For those of us who have had an epiphany, there is no meaning in the experience until it is told to another person,

until we testify to what we have witnessed.

I recognize those are loaded words - "testify" and "witness".

What immediately comes to my mind when I hear those words are the people in Boston who walk around with tracts, or wearing sandwich boards saying "The end is near".

I am being intentional in my use of them however, to reclaim them from our false perceptions.

By the way, this is also why I will quote Calvin to you, to reclaim him from the false understandings of him in the culture.

An epiphany, then, is a personal witnessing of the presence of the Lord in one's life.

It is really hard to know, especially in the culture we live in, how to testify to our witness to the presence of God in our lives without being labeled as

crazy,
kooky or
weird.

I don't think it needs to be that way and I think part of what Jesus is doing in our reading for today is showing us how it is done and why. He is teaching.

Throughout Jesus' earthly ministry, we can see examples of his teaching style.

It is a fairly traditional teaching method which simply tells people what is being taught, then shows them what is being taught and then charges them with the ability to do it on their own. We can call it the "show and tell" method of teaching, or in this case, the "tell, show and do" method.

Let's see what Jesus is up to in our story today. When the Bible does not tell us what the words of the teaching were, as in today, the teaching is actually expressed in what is done right after the teaching.

We don't need the words because we are being shown. Jesus' teaching must have been pretty important because he felt the need to project and be seen by everyone on shore, so he gets into Simon Peter's boat and teaches from there. Rather speaking to people one to one, which is what was probably happening when he was crowded by the people, Jesus wanted to speak to them all at once.

When he finished speaking, Jesus tells Peter to let down the fishing nets, which Peter and his crew have been doing all night with no success.

I don't know a whole lot about commercial fishing, but this is what Peter and his crew do for a living. It seems to me there is a broad middle ground which constitutes success in fishing. On one extreme is the night Peter has just had: "We worked hard all night and haven't caught anything." On the other extreme is what happens next. The catch is so large the nets begin to break and tear and once the haul is lifted onto the boat,

it is so heavy the boat begins to swamp. Neither outcome is particularly favorable. If you catch no fish, you have no money to support your family. If you catch too many, you have a momentary flash of glory before your boat sinks under the weight of fish - a little bit like the situation in The Perfect Storm movie.

From what we see here, I imagine Jesus' teaching had something to do with the provision of God and how Jesus is the embodiment, the flesh and blood example of that provision. This is what Peter sees as well. In the face of the provision of God, in the face of God's love and desire to help, we see how far short we fall from what God wishes us to be. We would rather have God go away, than have God's presence constantly remind us of our shortcomings. It is a fearful condition to be faced with the love and power of God.

Jesus tells the people these things, and then he shows the disciples what he means by manifesting a huge haul of fish.

Then Jesus, seeing Peter's fear, tells him, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." Jesus has told the disciples and the crowd about his provision, then he has shown them the extent of that provision

and now he asks the new disciples to do what he has shown.
They agree without hesitation.

Whatever Jesus taught,
then showed them
and then asked of them
seemed too good to pass up.

They left everything.

They had an epiphany, a God-inspired experience which
immediately deepened their relationship with God.

In all the Gospels, the disciples are told, in one way or another, to
spread the Good News.

Luke is very deliberate about the progression
and the nature of how that Good News spreads.

Luke tells us what the Prophets,
the wise ones from the East,
the Rabbis,
John the Baptist
and those in the temples

said and tell us about Jesus.

Then he shows us what Jesus did.

Then in Acts Luke shows us how the disciples did what Jesus
showed to them.

Paul uses the same technique of "tell, show, do" with the
Corinthians as well.

The reason this is an effective method of teaching where Godly
things are concerned

is because anyone can tell us anything, and there are people who
are paid very well to do precisely that.

But then they have to show us they can do what they tell.

The hurdle gets a little higher with that demand.

If what, for instance, Jesus tells us is also shown in what Jesus
does,

then we can have some confirmation which suggests
Jesus may actually be who he says he is
and knows what he is talking about.

Many people are content with just these levels of epiphany,
of knowing God's action in the world.

The problem with stopping there is now we are completely
reliant on simply what we have been told and what we have
seen.

People often prefer to be told what to think
and let someone else do the rest.

The power of our God-given souls and faith is only
activated, however,
when we make the final step,
when we make the effort of will,
and follow the call,
drop everything
and seek to do as Christ did.

This does not mean we are Christ.

Nor does it necessarily mean we can do what Christ did.

What it does mean, however, is that we are vessels who are
opened to the work Christ wants to do in the world.

This is what Paul is telling the Corinthians.

Our reading today is saying,

*"Listen, you crazy messed-up Corinthian church (that is
what the Greek says, I think...):*

I told you what the Good News is.

Then I showed you by coming to you

and starting this church

and showing you how to be a church.

*Your problem,
your issue,
your great difficulty,
is your unwillingness to do,
to lay down everything
and follow the teaching of this Good News
I have brought to you."*

What Paul is doing here is testifying,
being a witness to what God has done in his life
and in the life of the Corinthian church.
Notice he is not speaking to individuals, but to a whole church.
In the same way, Jesus does not catch *A* fish -
he catches a huge haul of fish.

We do this learning together.

We do this following together.

We do this work of God together.

And even having said that, we don't do it -

"It is not I, but the grace of God that is with me"

which accomplishes God's work in our community.

Now I hope I have told you what we are looking at today -
how the Lord teaches us.

And I think I have shown you, at least in Luke and Paul -
how the Lord acts with us to call us.

You can see these aspects easily enough in Isaiah's call story.

So the question is -

what are we called to do,

given God's work in our lives?

Well, this is the scary part.

I think we are called, based on Isaiah, the disciples and Paul,
to testify to God's presence in our lives,
to be a witness to the epiphany we have experienced with God.

I don't want to define too specifically what it means to testify
and witness.

You can see how it breaks in the Christian culture.

On the extremes, like Simon Peter's fishing expedition,
we have on one side those who say we only testify best
by doing things rather than saying anything,

which can sort of be like a long night of unsuccessful
fishing.

How can anyone know why you are doing the works of God
if you do not tell people in whose name you do these things
for others?

On the other side are those who say we can only tell people about
God and testify to them.

This is all they need and if they need help,
well, then they have to listen to our testimony before they
receive it.

Well, if you are on the receiving end of this sort of behavior,
it is likely to swamp your fragile boat with way too much of a haul.

As with most things, the answer lies somewhere in between.

We fear telling people the source of our motivation for our work
in the world,

and it is highly likely people will not ask.

But Isaiah, Luke and Paul all show us

that part of our doing is speaking.

We are a faith of words,

because words have power.

Words can change things,

Words can change lives.

So very quickly,
let me do what I have spoken of here and testify to you:

The man who stands before you today is not a great example of Christian faith.

God spoke God's call to me when I was 16.

You would think an experience like that would make me into a good evangelist for God,
a good candidate for the Baptists perhaps, but I am not.
My faith is weak.
It is easily shaken.

I live in constant fear I might lose it again.
I know enough now to simply wait out the barren periods in my faith life rather than dumping the whole thing.
But to learn that lesson, I had to wander far outside the Christian faith in the transformative power of God through Jesus Christ.
And I won't lie to you.
I wonder sometimes
"What if I am wrong about all this."

But here is the thing:
All this religious stuff,
all this spirituality,
comes down to what we care about.

What are we willing to struggle for and with?
What, if you will allow me a moment of Calvinism, are we willing to submit to?
I think if we are honest about our spiritual journeys we will see that God finds us -
we do not find God.
Most everything else constitutes a considerable amount of floundering around

in a great sea of human-created ideas and beliefs.
And if you are one of those who has been fortunate enough to have had an epiphany or two in your life,
at some point you have to give over to the source of that epiphany
and follow it with your whole being.

I have had only a couple epiphanies which have been transformative.
One was my baptism at 16 years old, which I spoke of about a month ago.
Another was only about 6 years ago, when I returned to the church and the Christian faith.
My epiphany there was two-fold -
evil is real and it exists;
and Jesus Christ does something about it.
As a kid, I had mystical experiences
and weird moments which seemed to push me into the world of the Spirit.
Those experiences laid the groundwork for me to be open to these little epiphanies in my life.
Everything else is a sort of working out of those epiphanies.

So when you look at me,
you see one who, like Joshua,
has refused the call more than once.
You see one who, like Isaiah today,
has doubted his worthiness for this calling.
You see one who, like Thomas,
refuses to trust that which I have simply been told by others.
And you see one who, like Paul,

has actively sought to break and tear down another's faith (successfully, by the way) in such a way that they have denied Christ.

Dragged back kicking and screaming,
I testify to you, with Paul, that
*"by the grace of God, I am what I am
and God's grace toward me has not been in vain"*.
My transformation by the work of God and Jesus Christ
has not been some grand reversal in my life.
I don't have some great rags to riches,
down-and-out to great recovery story.
All I can say is that, once I was living outside the grace and work
of God
and upon having been brought back to the grace of God by God
and God alone,
I am humbled and grateful for the simple transformations
and view of the world I have been granted.
For me, the simple truth of Christ's forgiveness and love
approaches the truth as I understand it.
And by an even greater grace through the Holy Spirit,
I have been given the gift of being able to come up here every
week and talk with you about God, Christ and the Holy Spirit.

And now, as you have heard your God tell you through His
prophets and messengers,
and as you have seen your Lord and Christ do the great and
simple things of God in others,
go yourselves and do and tell others what you have seen and
heard.
Amen.