

It's Catching
Luke 5:1-11
Rev. Emily Peck-McClain

Did you see those two quotations that I have at the top of the bulletin? The one says something that you've probably never heard before and probably don't believe: "Our puritan ancestors were a fun loving bunch." Puritan usually is not synonymous with fun. Puritanism probably brings to mind repression, sinfulness, too much work and not enough play. We call old fashioned ideas or views of the human as nothing but sinful or ideas of the body itself as being bad, "puritanical." Our protestant foremothers and forefathers, we learn in school, came to this country to experience "purity of worship" in communities of close-knit people with their laws being dictated by their own Christian moral sense. And let's be honest, how many of us hear "puritan" or even "Christian moral sense" and think, gee that sounds like the best party town ever! Talk about a city that never sleeps? That was the Massachusetts Bay colony for sure! Okay, so then there's the second quotations there - "The major contribution of Protestant thought to the knowledge of mankind is its massive proof that God is a bore" That sounds more like it, right? This is what we're used to hearing. Protestant work ethic and all of that. This is the root of Puritanism, isn't it?

This week, while listening to the Brian Lehrer Show on WNYC on Tuesday, I realized just how much I disagree with our commonly held ideas of what Protestantism is. The guest was Barbara Ehrenreich, who wrote a book called "Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy." A pastor called in and talked to the author about how much fun he had in seminary – dancing, partying, playing, being joyful. And she exclaimed, "John Calvin would be horrified!" His response was that Calvin had a lot of joy – apparently it's just not emphasized. Her point, though, is that people love to celebrate and be joyful together. We love to dance, feast, costume,

and smile together. In fact, she sees it as universal for humanity. But our puritan ancestors, in addition to systems of hierarchy and capitalism, are responsible for a loss of collective joy. “Bad news, those protestants. Real kill joys,” Ehrenreich said to Brian Lehrer. She says this Calvinist work ethic in the Reformation took hold. People were working 6 days a week and spend the 7th sitting on a hard pew listening to a long, boring sermon. Hopefully you’re not nodding your head at this point and thinking, yup, that’s what we’re doing. I mean, at least we have cushions on the pews, right? Well, all this got me thinking. Here’s the thing, worship is a collective joy for me. I find our time here together Sunday morning to be joyful, to be a time for our community to be together with God and each other and feel good. But if the commonly held view is that church is boring, God is boring, and communal worship in church is a reprimand, how does anyone ever get up the nerve (or desire) to walk through the doors of a church?

In today’s Gospel lesson, Peter, in an expression that might just make Calvin happy, falls at the feet of Jesus and exclaims, “Leave me alone! I’m such a sinner!” This in response to an amazing miracle. A fisherman who has been working all day long, with a Calvinist work ethic, to no avail, no fish at all, are told by Jesus to throw their nets in again and there are so many fish as a result that their boats begin to sink. Peter’s response? You better get away from me – I do not deserve this! And Jesus, in typical Jesus-ness respond, “Whatever. That is so not the point. Get up and coming with me because, let me tell you what, this message I’ve got is absolutely catching and I need you to help spread that word.” And it’s true, this Gospel message of good news to the poor, kingdom of God, and freedom in the purest sense, is catching. This stuff spreads like wildfire. Do you know how many Christians there are in the world? One statistic I found from 2000 said that 33% of the world population is Christian, that’s over 2,000 million.

This stuff is catching – just like Jesus said. He calls the first disciples, including Peter, by saying that they’ll be catching people and not fish if they follow him. And they do.

One of my favorite single verses in the Bible is John 16:22, “So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.” Not only does Jesus bring joy, he brings a joy that no one can take away. In fact, what do we have in our collective memories from the Christmas story when the angels show themselves the shepherds in the fields? “Do not be afraid, we bring you good news of great joy for all people.” (Luke 2:10) Let’s look into that. What is so catching about this movement and this message? What is so good about this news from Jesus?

I love this metaphor of fishing. The Lake of Gennesaret is the Sea of Galilee. The fishermen are not using a line and a hook (sometimes a fitting message for certain ways of spreading the Gospel message, otherwise known as evangelism). The fishermen are using nets. This method of fishing isn’t individualistic, many fish are caught at the same time. And I find that I think of a net as wrapping or embracing, rather than providing a sharp hook through the lip of the unsuspecting fish. Now, I realize both of these metaphors are a little problematic because either way a fish is caught and taken out of the water and probably eaten. But no metaphor is perfect. And in this story, the fish become so numerous that the boat begins to sink, which will, of course, land the fish back in the water. Any experience of the divine involves getting back into the world, though, so I find this still fits to a certain degree.

Jesus says, leave your nets, having met me, heard me preach, listened to me, and recognized your own shortcomings (because let’s face it, you’ll get nowhere without acknowledging that you’re not perfect), we’re off to do something more important than to catch fish. We’ve got people to catch. People who need to hear what I have to say, people who need a

change in their life, people who need a joy that nothing – not even an oppressive Roman government - can take away.

What is the news? And what's so good about it? The good news is pretty simple – This world is not the way it should be and it's not the way it needs to be. God has a different idea of how things can be done and I'm going to show you what that is. What's so good about it? The kingdom of God is what we can live and that kingdom is a kingdom of equality for everyone, a place where all needs are met, a place of community, a place of loving yourself and loving your neighbor, a place of being loved by your neighbor, and a place of being completely surrounded by and embraced by God's love. And that's really it. How could that not be catching?!

It's so catching that Peter hears that line, "Come with me, I'll have you catching people" and he does. This is something we can hardly imagine. Our calendars are full, our work is important, our lives are full of commitment. Can you just get up and go somewhere, totally spur of the moment? And what if, just what if, some message you got from God was so promising, so hopeful, so joyful, and so real that you just couldn't help but to go spread that message around?

There are probably some of you who are feeling antsy about the fact that I said a four-letter word a bit ago. Well, okay, it's actually 10 letters, but to a lot of Christians, it feels just like a four-letter word: "evangelism" Last Sunday we did a commissioning of church leaders for 2007. These are people who were called by the committee on lay leadership to a particular ministry here within the church. We've a church historian, interfaith coordinators, trustees, finance committee, children education committee, and lots more. But one leader did not get commissioned – we do not have an evangelism leader for this year. Is this because we've lost the good news of evangelism? Is this because we don't see the potential to invite new people into this community? Every week we have visitors who dare walk through the doors of our church

(along with all of us who dare every week to enter through these doors). We all step out of the world of Protestant work ethic and Puritanical standards because we dare to say, “No God is not a bore! God is good! And God adds something to my life that enables me to add something to the lives of others.” I just do not believe that we have no evangelism chairperson because we don’t believe the stuff we hear, know, believe, and feel about God isn’t good and isn’t worth sharing. I think it might just be because we need some serious reclamation of the word evangelism. From televangelists to tracts we pick up in subway stations damning different groups of people to eternal hell, it’s no wonder that evangelism doesn’t feel good and may not even feel right to us. But if you look at the bulletin board outside of the sanctuary, you’ll see the pictures of the over 20 new members who joined this church in 2006. Every single one of them found what St. Paul and St. Andrew does with the message of God to be catching. Every single one of them is a new member of not just our church, but also our family and our social circle. From monthly potlucks to workshops to coffee hour to protests to celebrating holidays together – the 435 members of this church are family and we want more! We want new people to hang out with, new people to share the love and joy that we get from God with, new people to get to know and new people to let get to know us. People, this is evangelism! It has nothing to do with tracts or damning people to hell, or disrespecting another person’s choices. Evangelism is what Simon Peter does. And what if Peter and James and John said, “No thank you, I’d rather just hang out with these fish.” What we all would be missing! What joy, what hope, what relationship we’d all be missing!

Now the point of this sermon is not to convince someone to be the evangelism chair. Now, if someone does feel that calling, that’s fantastic, but that’s not the point. The point is that we have something here. We have a joy and a fellowship and a connection to the divine that has caught us up in a net of good news. And we know just how catching it is. The point of this

sermon is to have fun with your God and with your church and go spread this catching message of the kingdom of God to the people that you meet along your way. This is just too good to keep to ourselves.

Almost two years ago, the youth group did an interfaith month where we spent time learning about other religions in the world. We visited a Buddhist church, we had a Muslim come talk to us, and we went to a Friday night Shabbat service at B'nai Jeshurun. There was some serious collective joy in this room that night when congregants began dancing in the aisles and singing. The truth is that God is a god of joy. We are happy to be in the presence of God, happy enough to sing hymns, happy enough to accept forgiveness, happy enough to spread this “catching stuff” around. And yet, it’s true, we rarely dance in the aisles of this place when it’s SPSA and not BJ. Let’s change that.