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Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

St. Paul's (WELS) Moline, IL

3:6

Made New in Jesus

I. By bringing out our worst;

II. Jesus makes us our best.

Luke 5:1-11

Have you ever been around someone who because of their unpredictable behavior or their propensity for saying awkward or inappropriate things made you and everyone else feel uncomfortable? Not only can being around such a person take the fun out of certain occasions but it can at the same time bring out the worst in others. As soon as they begin speaking you can even see some people brace themselves for what happens next.

Recently I was reminded of such behavior when watching an episode of The Office. In this particular episode the main character who is a branch manager had the job of going around and giving a motivational sales speech to salespeople of different branches. During his speech he wanted to show them a way to remember people's names by using a mnemonic device, which is picking out someone's feature and then using that to remember someone's name usually because the image and the name both begin with the same first letter. When he pointed out to each person the character trait he used to remember their name he picked out everyone's worst feature and it was embarrassing for all. This of course is what made it so funny. Such behavior may make for funny television but it makes for poor interpersonal skills in real life.

No one wants to be reminded of their flaws, no one wants to be reminded what is "wrong" with them. This is why we so desire being around people who can bring out our best, who inspire us, who hopefully can make us something better than we could otherwise be. Such people that are able to accomplish this are rare and they are cherished.

To bring out the best in someone the world focuses on the good one does and downplays the bad or the insufficient. Does someone have a character flaw? Ignore it or downplay it. Say something like everyone has their faults so just don't focus on it. Focus on what is right not on what is wrong.

This is generally good advice and it does work. Yet there is something fundamental that such thinking also brings: the idea that imperfection and mistakes are the normal course of things for all time and in all places. After all what could be more truthful than: "To err is

human." and also, "No one is perfect." Today we see that these so called truths are not so, that there is a more fundamental truth given to us in a very surprising way.

Today is the last Sunday after the Epiphany event. It is one last Sunday of encountering Jesus in His ministry as He reveals Himself to us and what He has come to give to us. Jesus has come to change us and to make us into what God intended for us in the beginning: a personal relationship with Him into eternity. Surprisingly Jesus has us best understand ourselves and our future by bringing out what is the worst in us.

Today we encounter Jesus at Lake Gennesaret where Simon-Peter and his companions James and John were fishing. After a long night of fruitless effort Jesus preaches a sermon to the people afterwards He tells Simon and the others to go fishing once more. When they do so, miraculously they catch so many fish they required more help. What is so interesting is the result of this miracle. Notice the response from Peter. **"When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners."** (verse 8-10a).

The response of Peter is not one of simple joy but one of his own sinfulness and evilness standing before Jesus. So strong are these feelings that Peter asks Jesus to leave him for Peter is not worthy to be in Jesus' presence. This is what happens when we come into the presence of God.

What was it that Peter saw or heard that motivated him to ask Jesus to leave? Peter was confronted first of all with Jesus' power and relationship to God. Remember Jesus told Peter to go back into the lake to fish after He had preached to them. We are not given Jesus' words preached from that boat but we do know Jesus was preaching about the kingdom of God and how it had come to men. At the same time Peter was confronted with Jesus powerful words and actions he contrasted all this with his own self--a sinner who had many flaws.

We cannot encounter Jesus and listen to His teachings without at the same time recognizing just how far away from perfection we are. We cannot come into the presence of Jesus and His teachings and not realize that we alone are far from God and unable to stand before God without being condemned.

What does this say about us? Is getting close to God a bad thing? Of course not. For Peter, James and John and for us too being confronted with what is worst in us is both necessary and healthy. This is the

opposite of what the world does but by so doing Jesus does in and to us what we can get nowhere else. Jesus does this gently and powerfully.

Notice how Jesus did this for those early disciples. Jesus is at Lake Gennesaret where normal everyday people are doing their daily work. Jesus is along the seashore and He meets Peter, James and John at their place of work as fishermen. Jesus meets them and gives them an encounter that is most appropriate for them. Jesus uses the fishing boats and a fishing experience to give them gifts: the gift of a great catch and the gift of seeing Jesus as a powerful man who can change their lives forever.

Is it any different for anyone here this morning? The answer is no. What is so amazing about Jesus is that the gift of salvation is something that can be given to even an infant through the waters of holy baptism. As we grow older and become young adults our religious education is learning what God has already done in our lives through baptism. Sometimes we sin and we think that once we are confirmed or have gotten to a certain stage in our life then that is all there is for us--we have nothing more to learn. How foolish this is however. The simple fact is that at no part of our life do we stop learning. All of us regardless of age, background and life experience ever stops learning. What is amazing and exciting is that our growth in God will never cease because God will always be larger and grander than we can become.

Today we are to realize that God is with us wherever life takes us. The question then becomes, are you continuing to grow? Are you different today than you were a month ago, a year ago or five years ago? Is God taking you further along in your faith?

Another important teaching that we learn today is that with God's power and strength we can accomplish far more than we could ever do by ourselves. There are several aspects that Peter and the others teach us about their fishing endeavor at Jesus' request.

Luke, the author simply tells us that when they went out again to fish, despite not having caught anything after a full night's work they now caught a tremendous catch. What this tells us is that with God on our side we can do things that otherwise we could not. Second of all--and this is easily overlooked--it shows us that the blessings Jesus brings in our lives affect our lives here and now as well as into eternity. It may seem obvious but thing of the great blessing catching all those fish made not only for the fishermen but for the people who were fed as well! In other words the changes and the works that we do in Christ's name are not just something for another world distant from the here and now but they bless us today and they bless others too.

All too often I believe the mindset exists that God saves us here and now when we have faith in Him but all that is for something when we die; that faith is not a daily gift or event. Not true. Today God changes us. Today God is at work in our lives. Today, Sunday morning God speaks to us through His word and He confronts us with the sinners we are but He does so that we may hear the gift of grace and take it to heart. And what about when we go home? Do we leave it all here? No. The changes God makes in us changes the way we interact and love our families. The way we raise our children, the way we treat our neighbors, all of these are positively impacted by the gifts God gives us here at worship.

We need to listen to Jesus' words spoken to Peter. Jesus didn't listen to Peter's request to depart from him rather Jesus responded, **"Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men."** (verse 10). What Luke tells us next is key to fully understand what Jesus requires and what He asks of us today. **"So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him."** (verse 11, emphasis mine). Peter and the others left everything and followed Jesus. We are do to so as well.

Only when we are totally committed to the faith can Jesus give us all that He desires too. Only when we follow Jesus can we be transformed into the person He can make us into. There can be no such thing as a part time or temporary faith. Jesus makes this plain when while preaching the Sermon on the Mount He states: **"No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other."** (Matthew 6:24).

Does this sound too strong a request? It wasn't too strong for those early disciples because Jesus was taking them with Him as He was going to the cross to die for the sins of the whole world. Jesus takes us there too. Only when we recognize our own sin, a sin we cannot remove or pay for ourselves are we ready to go to the cross too. This last Sunday after the Epiphany Jesus reveals to us that only those who need Him can hear his call to follow him leaving everything behind; only those who place their full trust in Him can take to heart His words and His promise "do not be afraid." Today because we recognize our sin we realize we need Jesus and we can follow Him. Amen.