

**A Sermon Preached by
Fr. Mark Evans, Epiphany 5, Year C
February 7th, 2010 at St. Thomas, Menasha, Wisconsin**

Lessons Isaiah 6:1-13; Psalm 138; 1 Cor 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

How many of you have gone fishing and come back with an empty stringer or an empty live well? How many of you have gone on a fishing trip, caught little or nothing, and had your luck change by hiring a guide to take you to the best spots? Given that context, the message of our gospel lesson today is that in addition to changing water into wine and healing the sick, Jesus is a fishing guide of the first order. Enough said, let's move on to the creed.

Hmmm, maybe we shouldn't swallow that explanation hook, line and sinker. Maybe that's a little too simplistic. Perhaps we should troll deeper for the message; cast our net wider for a fuller meaning.

There are many messages in today's gospel; more than we could grapple with in a week of study. Today, I want to focus on the aspect of call in this story. This story about the call of the disciples is propitious for the life of St. Thomas, as you have extended a call to a priest who will begin his ministry in this place this week.

Notice I did not say he will start working at St. Thomas this week. A call is not the same thing as a job. The 12 did not work for Jesus, Jesus did not employ them, and he did not act as their boss. A call is something that is much deeper than an employment contract. It is even deeper than a covenant.

A call is a wholesale commitment of all that one has, body, mind and soul, to Jesus Christ and by extension to the Church. Not church in the sense of this building, or the parish of St. Thomas, although this is where Fr. Osborne will live out his call; but Church with a capital C. By the Church, I mean that earthly institution that is the Body of Christ, which encompasses all that is seen and unseen in the Kingdom of God. This concept of Church goes beyond the parish and even the diocese although both are integral parts of the Church.

Even though a local congregation pays a stipend to a priest, they do not employ the priest in the usual sense of that term. In a recent clergy newsletter, Bishop Jacobus stated it well. He said: 'A congregation does not pay a priest for doing a job, but rather provides the means of living for fulfilling their calling to serve the church'.

It may surprise some of you to learn that Fr. Osborne will not be a member of St. Thomas. Priests are canonically resident in a diocese under the authority of the bishop of that diocese but they are not members of any particular parish, even the one where they exercise their ministry. Even though I live and work within the diocese of Milwaukee, I continue to be canonically resident in the diocese of Fond du Lac and therefore Fr. Osborne and I are on the same footing. Although I do ministry somewhere else and he does ministry here, we have the same rights and we have the same responsibilities to our bishop and to our diocese. I exercise my ministry as a priest on staff at Nashotah House seminary and he will exercise his ministry as the rector of St. Thomas but our call is the same – to serve as priests in Christ's one, holy and apostolic Church – and I continue to spell Church with a capital C in this context.

The story of the call of the disciples also gives us hints and clues about what it means to answer the call to follow Christ. In our story, the would be disciples, Peter, James and John are fishermen. They are tradesmen who have amassed enough wealth to purchase boats and nets but they are not wealthy by any standard nor are they leaders in their community by any stretch of

the imagination. To say that they have little in sense of worldly wealth or power would be a huge understatement. They had very little money and even less authority in a worldly sense, yet, they are the foundation of the Church as we know it today. They are ordinary people upon whom Jesus will come to rely for spreading the good news of the kingdom.

We can take comfort from this story that the success of the Church does not rely on who we are or what we have, save a willingness to chuck it all and follow Him who is our salvation. Jesus controls the bounty as he showed in the Sea of Galilee that day. As any fisherman knows, fishing in broad daylight decreases the chances of catching fish because the fish can see the boat, the net and the bait. That's why Peter and the others were fishing at night. As you can imagine, Peter was understandably incredulous when Jesus asked him to put out to fish in the light of day, especially after they had fished all night and caught nothing. But, Peter does as Jesus asks though and, even though the conditions are all wrong, the fishermen catch as many fish as their nets and boats will hold. Peter then realizes that Jesus is the power behind these events and falls at his feet in worship.

Jesus is able to create bounty out of scarcity and that is good news to us in these times of economic uncertainty. If God can cause enough fish to be caught that it almost swamps two boats, then God can provide the necessary resources to fund the ministry of His Church. However, you notice that God did not just have the fish swim onto shore so that the disciples could scoop them up. Part of the story is Jesus asking the disciples to continue working at the job they knew. Work is work, whether it's in a factory, on a farm, in an office or in the church. There are miracles but there is no free lunch. We cannot assume that God will bless us with His bounty merely because we happen to stop by for a church service once a week. Going through the motions of Christianity is not the same thing as answering a call.

Which leads me to an important point – ordained persons are not the only people who answer a call. You will recall how Paul compares the Body of Christ, the Church, to the human body. The human body is not only an eye, or a hand; it is all of the parts working together in harmony for the health of the entire body. So it is in the Church. The Church is not only the clergy. It requires the efforts of all kinds of people – those who have a gift for music, for teaching, for hospitality, for repairs and maintenance. I could make this list much longer but you get the idea – if the Church had to rely solely on its clergy, it would not be a church, it would merely be a club where people in funny clothes hung out together but nothing would get done. The life of the Church requires that everyone answer the call that has been given him or her by God, working in harmony for the health of the entire Church.

Every one of you in the pew this morning is a vital part of that body and here's another important point – you are not yet complete. There are other gifts out there somewhere, in the form of people who are not yet part of the body, that are necessary for the health of the Church and its mission. Part of your call is to reach out and make disciples of all people in order that the body can be strengthened and so that God may be glorified.

Fr. Osborne may be here full-time but he cannot do this by himself. He will be your leader and will help guide you in this call but the strength of the body means that the eyes, hands, ears and even the stomach must do their individual part for the good of the body. Now, you may think of yourself as the appendix, a part of the body that has no discernable function; but believe me, you are every bit as vital as any member of the clergy. If you find yourself in the position of not knowing what your place is in God's plan, I invite you to pray to God to give you guidance and that you seek out the counsel of mature Christians to help you find your place.

Everyone has a call that is to be answered. Jesus took fishermen, a tax collector like Matthew, and even a zealot who was antagonistic to Christianity like Paul, and made them the foundation of the Church. There is a place for you in the Body of Christ. Fr. Osborne has answered the call to come here and minister for the good of the whole Church. God also has a call that each of you is to answer. Only God knows what He can do with all of you working together for His glory but it will be amazing when you do.