

Sermon for 2/10/19

Luke 5: 1-11, “Becoming fishers of men”

Prayer of Illumination:

Almighty God, in you are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Open our eyes that we may see the wonders of your Word; and give us grace that we may clearly understand and freely choose the way of your wisdom; through Christ our Lord. Amen (“Prayers of Illumination for Scripture Readers”).

Sermon: “Caretakers of Creation, Catchers of humankind”

Many of us are familiar with this passage and this particular lesson Jesus has to offer on the shores of Lake Gennesaret . . . “becoming fishers of men,” or as I like to say, “becoming fishers of *humankind*.” There are so many take-aways from this simple scene:

- moving past hesitation, trusting in Jesus
- having faith to lower those nets just one more time
- the gravity of the difference between small, ephemeral blessings (the fish) and eternal blessings (growing in faith, taking action despite hesitation or fear)
- a mindset shift from catching material goods to catching the human spirit by taking action in sharing the Good News of faith, hope, and love.

This parable has great relevance today; often times we find ourselves in boats with fishless nets. On a personal level, it may be in trying to keep up with social or perceived pressures to have the latest and greatest tech, fashion, or gear. Or perhaps the nets are coming up empty when we try to find real connections, feel a sense of progress, or simply feel as though we are making a difference.

On a larger, global level, fishermen's nets are literally coming up empty and the collective feeling of helplessness and hopelessness towards the health of the planet is nothing short of defeating. Without being overwhelmingly bleak on Children's Sunday, here are some more facts to consider about God's Creation:

1. Average temperatures have climbed 1.4 degrees Fahrenheit (0.8 degree Celsius) around the world since 1880, much of this in recent decades.
(Martusewicz et al. 3)
2. The 20th century's last two decades were the hottest in 400 years and possibly the warmest for several millennia, according to a number of climate studies. 11 of the past 12 years are among the warmest since 1850.
(Martusewicz et al. 3)
3. The Arctic is feeling the effects the most. Average temperatures in Alaska, western Canada, and eastern Russia have risen at twice the global average.
(Martusewicz et al. 3)
4. Arctic ice is rapidly disappearing, and the region may have its first completely ice-free summer by 2040 or earlier. Polar bears and Indigenous cultures are already suffering from the sea-ice loss. (Martusewicz et al. 3)
5. Glaciers and mountain snows are rapidly melting – for example, Montana's Glacier National Park now has only 27 glaciers, versus 150 in 1910. In the northern hemisphere, thaws also come a week earlier in spring and freezes begin a week later. (Martusewicz et al. 3)
6. Coral reefs, which are highly sensitive to small changes in water temperature, suffered the worst bleaching – or die-off in response to stress – ever

recorded in 1998, with some areas seeing bleach rates of 70%. Experts expect these sorts of events to increase in frequency and intensity in the next 50 years as sea temperatures rise. (Martusewicz et al. 3)

Concurrently, another part of God's Creation is also in crisis:

1. Nine out of ten refugees are hosted by developing countries. ("Global Issues: Fast Facts")
2. Unclean water and poor sanitation are the leading cause of child mortality. ("Global Issues: Fast Facts")
3. Recent census data shows that half the population qualifies as poor or low income, with 20% of Millennials living in poverty. ("Economic Justice Facts & Figures")
4. According to a 2016 study by the Urban Institute, teenagers in low-income communities are often forced to join gangs, save school lunches, and sell drugs . . . because they cannot afford food. ("Economic Justice Facts & Figures")
5. 42% of children in the U.S. live in a household with at least 1 parent earning under \$15 an hour. ("Economic Justice Facts & Figures")
6. Approximately 1 in 5 adults in the U.S. – 48.3 million, or 18.5% - experiences mental illness in a given year. ("Mental Health by the numbers")
7. **1,730**: That's the number of black Americans, per 100,000 in the population, who are currently incarcerated. (By comparison, only 270 white Americans per 100,000 are currently incarcerated.) In America today, a

black American is 6.4 times more likely to be incarcerated than a white American. Both white and black Americans have seen a dramatic increases in incarceration rates: In 1968, 604 black Americans and 111 white Americans (both numbers are per 100,000) were incarcerated. (“Four Figures that Explain Racial Inequality in America”)

Even from this collection of statistics, it is evident that ecologically, environmentally, socially, economically, nutritionally, mentally, and racially, God’s creation is in crisis. But how do we help? Where do we even begin? Is it even worth attempting to be catchers of humankind if there is no habitable creation in which to live? No worthwhile people to catch?

Last semester I had the privilege to take a class as part of the “Education for Sustainability” program at Manhattanville College. One of the readings was entitled, “EcoJustice Education: Toward Diverse, Democratic, and Sustainable Communities.” To help answer some of these questions, I’d like to share with you some of the insights, language, and mindset shifts that the authors propose. If we are to honestly and actively live Jesus’ message of being “catchers of humankind” (and I would add, caretakers of Creation), we may need some “how-to’s” in order to get started.

So, three goals:

First, understanding the meaning and purpose of EcoJustice.

Second, iterating ways to shift our mindset or change our *thinking* in order to perform EcoJustice.

Third, how to act by engaging in discourses for sustainable cultures.

Number one: the purpose of EcoJustice is to combat the current culture and economic system of “short-term profit motive and ideology of unlimited growth (that) have created a society that dangerously overshoots the carrying capacity of the bio-systems depended upon for life” (Martusewicz et al. 23). Short-term profit motive being that of unsustainable practices to maximize profit, such as using harmful, cheap chemicals in production of material goods; unlimited growth being an entirely unsustainable model that will ultimately deplete our resources faster than they can regenerate. EcoJustice aims to “develop a citizenry with an eco-ethical consciousness; people who recognize the importance of protecting their local community’s health and welfare, while understanding the ways larger social, political, and economic systems function historically to degrade the social and ecological relationships necessary for life” (Martusewicz et al. 22). In essence, EcoJustice is when ecological systems are healthy and humankind acts to care for each other, creation is healthy.

Second, shifting into an eco-ethical mindset. A vast oversight in creation care is that the “ecological crisis is really a cultural crisis – this is, a crisis in the way people have learned to think and thus behave in the relation to larger life systems and towards each other. It can be shifted if we learn to think differently about our relationship to each other and to the natural world, and if we help others to identify and revalue those critical practices of mutual support and inter-dependence that still exist in communities all over the world” (Martusewicz et al. 22-23)

For example, our reliance on “fossil-fuel-based technologies has so much power that we are willing to destroy entire ecosystems, and the economic well-

being of many human communities in order to take it out of the earth” (Martusewicz et al. 4). How has this come to be the system we rely on at-large in society?

Culturally aware theorists will point to the fact that this mindset was “made possible over time by important shifts in thinking that put individual gain above communities, human needs or wants above non-human, “progress” and growth above simple happiness and well-being” (Martusewicz et al. 4).

Another example is when people are excluded from consideration as decision-makers or citizens within a community. Exclusion leads to being degraded to a status of lesser value or being seen as less worthy. Excluded people suffer as their “interests or needs will likely not be met, their knowledge and experience will not be considered important to the community, or even worse, they may be forced to live in situations in which they are exploited or controlled for someone else’s benefit” (Martusewicz et al. 30). “When we exclude an entire race of people from what they need to live well, or rationalize their exploitation based on the color of their skin or their ethnic background, we call these practices, “racism,” or “ethnocentrism””; based on gender, “sexism”” (Martusewicz et al. 30). And when we define the natural world as less important than human life, and thus unworthy of our care, or claim it as a commodity or as property to do with as we please, we call that belief system, “anthropocentrism”” (Martusewicz et al. 30). These are all examples of what has come to be called *value-hierarchized ways of thinking*.

Thus, at the core of any EcoJustice work, we need a mental shift to combat value-hierarchized thinking and reorient our cultural crisis. One recommended start is beginning with language; language shapes thinking, thinking shapes behavior, and

behavior ultimately influences culture. So, take the idea, ““developed countries should aid developing countries.” This statement highlights that there is an evolutionary spectrum from low to high development among different groups of human cultures, that developed is better than less developed, and thus that the developing countries need to go in the direction of the developed countries – to become more like them. Developed also implies strength and superiority, whereas developing countries are weak and inferior.

Now, how can we expose the hidden metaphor that hides the reality that developed countries are the largest contributors to the ecological crisis, using far more energy and creating far more pollution per person than the developing countries? It becomes clearer if we invert the metaphor: what if we referred to the industrial countries as “overdeveloped” and the less industrialized countries as “appropriately developed”?” (Martusewicz et al. 67-68). The fact that this comes across as so counter-cultural exposes how the thought is structured to value-hierarchy metaphors – “virtually any public discussion assumes – without thinking – that the less industrial countries need to become more like the rich countries” (Martusewicz et al. 68).

The mindset shift occurs entirely in the *thinking*.

We defined EcoJustice, we’ve examined the mindset shift and the change in thinking required to embrace the ideas of EcoJustice. Thirdly, let’s consider how to act by engaging in discourses for sustainable cultures. Here are some practices we may embrace in order to move forward:

- Using holistic metaphors to describe earth . . . instead of a machine with separate parts, consider describing the planet as all things being connected; focusing on kinship language of respect and reverence, a living thing, not a robotic thing.
- Sustainable cultures tend to see things through the lenses of family and community rather than the individual. The good of the community is placed higher than the good of the individual.
- “In contrast to anthropocentrism of modernity, sustainable cultures are *ecological* and organized in networks rather than hierarchies” (Martusewicz et al. 89). Nature is seen as a moral equal, deserving just as much respect as humans.
- Sustainable societies “maintain *non-commodified traditions*, meaning that most of their relationships do not involve monetary transactions. Instead, activities are characterized by traditions that involve face-to-face relationships, community, and intergenerational knowledge” (Martusewicz et al. 91). It may be difficult, but could you imagine Christmas without the hypercapitalistic practice of gifts, presents, and more gifts? . . . Ok, maybe that was too far.

I realize that this amounts to nothing less than a banquet of food for thought about Creation Care; I realize that the undertaking of having an impact or making a difference in the context of global creation change is intimidating; I realize that shifting mindsets and/or changing hearts towards an eco-ethical approach may be

too vast an initiation point for change. However, like Jesus on the banks and boats of Lake Gennesaret, flipping the paradigm of how he will teach us to be “fishers of humankind,” I see this as a call to serve both God’s people and God’s creation. May we . . .

. . . move past hesitation, trusting in Jesus,

. . . have faith to lower those nets just one more time,

. . . appreciate the gravity of the difference between small, ephemeral blessings (the fish) and eternal blessings (growing in faith, taking action despite hesitation or fear)

. . . cultivate a mindset shift to pursue EcoJustice as a means to act in faith, grow in spirit, and share the love Jesus has for us and all of creation.

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