

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

Br. Samuel Springuel

10 February, 2019

1st Reading Isaiah 6:1–2A,3–8

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 138:1–2,2–3,4–5,7–8

2nd Reading 1 Corinthians 15:1–11

Gospel Luke 5:1–11

When was the last time someone asked you for a favor? Something they could not do for themselves, but which you could do fairly easily? Was it a big thing, something that took you away from your own concerns for an extended period of time? Or a small thing which you accomplished in a few minutes and were quickly back working on your own priorities? How did you respond to that request? Was it an enthusiastic “yes” like Isaiah’s “Here I am! Send me!”? Something you practically couldn’t wait to do? Was it a grudging “alright,” from which you extracted an expectation of a return favor? Or maybe an exasperated “sure;” you’d do it because of who asked, but you really wished they hadn’t? Or was it just a simple “no;” the favor wasn’t worthy of your time and effort.

Favors are an important part of what binds human society together. When we ask someone for a favor, we are acknowledging a dependence on that other person. They are capable of doing something which we ourselves find difficult or even impossible, and it is something that we need, or at least want enough that we’re not willing to do without it in the name of independence. When we do a favor for someone else, we are putting a value on our relationship with them. We are willing to take time and effort away from our own concerns in order to support somebody else because we value them more than what that time and effort could accomplish for ourselves. By means of favors we form new relationships and strengthen existing ones.

This is the context in which we find Jesus in today’s gospel. Jesus needs a favor. The crowd has become so big, that he finds himself being pressed in from all sides and overwhelmed. Without room to move and be seen, he cannot teach the whole crowd who have come to listen to the Word of God. He is at risk of becoming just another body in the crowd of people.

That’s when he spies Simon on the shoreline. Here was someone he knew, someone he had a prior relationship with. In an incident skipped over by the lectionary between last week’s gospel and today’s, Luke tells us that when Jesus first started preaching in Capernaum, Simon had hosted Jesus for dinner and at this dinner Jesus had cured Simon’s mother-in-law of a fever. Building on that relationship, when Jesus sees Simon washing his nets on the shoreline next to his boat, he asks for a favor: the use of Simon’s boat, and since Jesus himself doesn’t know how to operate the boat, he’s a carpenter, not a fisherman, Simon’s time to do the boat handling. Simon’s answer is “yes.” The favor is not difficult.

Simon has already called it quits on fishing for the day, he doesn't have a catch that he needs to get to market and sell, and he was probably just looking at the crowd wondering how he was going to get through to go home. Taking Jesus out in the boat gives him something to do while he waits for the crowd to disperse enough that he can head for home, and it might just even up the balance sheet between the two of them as well.

The story doesn't end there, however. Once Jesus is done speaking to the crowd, at the very moment when Simon is probably thinking "Hey, I can go home now," Jesus asks for another favor. Again, the favor isn't difficult: row out to the deeper part of the lake and give Jesus a fishing demonstration. It's probably a bit pointless, as Simon already knows that the fish aren't around to be caught at the moment, and it certainly is inconvenient as it means not going home for bit longer. Simon gives voice to one of these objections at the start of his reply: "Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing." But Jesus isn't asking for anything that Simon hasn't done hundreds if not thousands of times before. We can almost hear the sigh of resignation as Simon agrees: "but at your command I will lower the nets."

And then something unexpected happens. Where Simon thought he was doing Jesus a favor, he finds that Jesus is doing him a favor. It turns out that Simon is not the giver, he's the receiver. When he goes to pull up his net, it turns out to have more fish in it than should be reasonably possible: 2 whole boats full, in one cast. No wonder Simon is overwhelmed with awe and asks for Jesus to depart. He already knew Jesus was a holy man, he'd cured his mother-in-law after all, but this, this superabundant catch of fish, it is simply too much for Simon. There is no way he can possibly return this favor. He has his first glimpse of the what real, God-given generosity means and it scares him. He wants out.

Jesus, however, won't let him go. "Do not be afraid," he commands. "I do not ask for favors in return. I have something more planned for you. I will make you fishers of men." Jesus is demanding more of Simon. Asking for more than Simon ever thought he could possibly give. And he is also promising more to Simon: more than Simon ever imagined he would receive. For when it comes to God, giving is receiving and receiving is giving.