

## Gone Fishin' – Epiphany 5C

“Finally, sisters and brothers, whatsoever is true, noble, right, pure and lovely, whatever is admirable—if there be any virtue or if there be any praise, think on these things.” If we imagine a benevolent higher power, a loving God, one characteristic this god has is the intention that all of Creation be well. Just as St. Paul warns us that, just because the law of God has been superceded by the love of God, doesn't mean that we should go out and try to break as many laws as possible in order to elicit more forgiveness, it is unimaginable that a loving god's plan is for some parts of Creation to be well at the cost of other parts' misery. God intends wellness and happiness for all creatures, for all of Creation. We who are followers of Jesus have concluded from our ancient stories that the means to happiness is love. Jesus meets us where we are. If we would be like Jesus, we must do the same. He approaches us in the things we know and love.

But, as the wise monk pointed out, “There are many paths to the feet of the One.” Love takes many forms. We can love people, places, things and stories; we can also love activities. Setting aside matters of one's family (after all, not every family is graced with happy concord), think for a moment about what you love to do – just ponder that for a moment and we will return to it.

Mary Oliver's poem *The Summer Day* concludes, “  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
With your one wild and precious life?

Our passage from Isaiah this morning describes the sequence: we become aware of the presence of God, we confess our need for spiritual nourishment and healing, we practice (the ongoing dance) of purification, we observe and absorb the Word and wisdom of the ages (those who have ears to hear), and we accept our commission to pass this experience on; to feed God's sheep. This passing-on is carried out through many forms of witness: our testimony in the stories we tell, the good works we do, the faith we nourish, the art we make, the fun we have.

And I said: "Woe is me! (in the Hebrew, "Oy!) I am lost; I am unclean, and I live among a people unclean; yet my eyes have seen the Lord!" Then one of the seraphs touched my mouth with the live coal: "Now your guilt has departed; your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

We did not invent the Word, we receive it, if we are receptive. We do not generate love, we live and move and have our being within it (or not). Our responsibility is not to formulate the truth, but to dwell in it. The Gospel provides us a true place to reside. We develop the habit of seeing the world through the window of God's love. And we try to go and do likewise.

Here's political scientist Samuel J. Abrams, in an essay published this past week: "I am pleased to report that the American dream is alive and well for an overwhelming majority of Americans." This claim might sound far-fetched given the cultural climate in the United States today. Hardly a day goes by without a fresh tale of economic anxiety, political disunity or social struggle. Opportunities to achieve material success and social mobility through hard, honest work —

which many of us have assumed to be the core idea of the American dream — appear to be diminishing. But Americans, it turns out, have something else in mind when they dream.

The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago is renowned for offering “deep” samples of Americans, not just random ones, so that researchers can be confident that they are reaching Americans in all walks of life: rural, urban, exurban and so on. Last year they joined the American Enterprise Institute in surveying a nationally representative sample of 2,411 Americans about their attitudes toward community and society. The center The findings were [released on Tuesday](#).

Tamara and Chris Johnson, Centuria, Wis.: “Our American dream is simple,” Ms. Johnson said. “The rewards are not things, they are experiences — a meal, a conversation, a walk, a hug. Our American dream is not easy. It requires grit, persistence and drive. Our American dream is not exclusive — it gives. In our American dream no one is left behind.”

What our survey found about the American dream came as a surprise. Americans did not choose as essential factors becoming wealthy, owning a home or having a successful career. Instead, 85 percent indicated that “to have freedom of choice in how to live” was essential to achieving the American dream.

Traditional factors were seen as less important. Only 16 percent said that to achieve the American dream, they believed it was essential to “become wealthy,” only 45 percent said it was essential “to have a better quality of life than your parents,” and just 49 percent said that “having a successful career” was key.

This pattern — seeing the American dream as more about community and individuality than material success and social mobility — appeared across demographic and political categories.

Thus it feels right, it stands to reason and it compels to conviction that if we are to follow God's plan for Creation, we will endeavor to do what we love as much as we can. This does not mean we will devote every waking moment to painful sacrifice and virtuous self-deprivation, it means that we will kneel in the grass, stroll through the fields and be idle and blessed, for these are things that we love. So what are some of the things we love to do?

I love to fish. Any kind of fishing is fun for me, off a boat, in a stream, by a lake. But the greatest of these is from the beach. There's something about spending time on the threshold between land and sea, between earth and deep, that I find at once and paradoxically exciting and comforting. I learned on an island in the great grey Atlantic, where the beach slopes down to a – sometimes treacherous, sometimes welcoming – but always beautiful heavy surf.

To get a Striped Bass, the preferred method is to use a 12 to 14-foot bamboo rod, with a heavy lure at the end of a strong line. You hold the pole facing back away from the ocean like a javelin thrower, run down the slope to the water, and fling it as far out in the water as you can. Then you reel it in at a medium clip until the fish takes it. The sheer joy in all this is abundant, out there at the edge of the world getting wet and sandy and lucky. And the day is capped off very nicely when you take your big Bass to the fish market, where they give you \$5 a pound for it (which was a nice piece of change in 1979). You get paid for doing what you love.

When I lived on Nantucket Island that winter, I spent my mornings on a tiny boat around the harbor and its inlets, dredging for the wily Bay Scallop. The meat of these is a true delicacy, as delicately delicious as anything I've tasted, and the daily catch is strictly limited to five bushels per fisher. This meant that we would have

our limit before noon, and one could spend the rest of the day walking the moors, reading books, doing plays and surfcasting for Bluefish and Striper.

So doing what you love is very much a godly vocation. And if you can make it your work, all the better. But even if you must make a living doing something you're not sublimely crazy about, it's still important to ask oneself, "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" I don't know exactly what a prayer is either, but I'm pretty sure it has a lot to do with this question which, put another way is along the lines of "What in God's name is going on with you?" So we have (cooks and sew-ers, walkers and travelers, painters and singers) and fisherfolk too. There are many paths to the feet of the One. God knows this. Jesus knows this.

It doesn't matter from whom you hear it; much less does it matter whom you tell. "*Wo be balo baño le kan,*" is the wisdom of the Wolof elders: "If you own goats, you must build their house, but where the black and white goats sleep is up to them." In other words, just speak. Live in love; do what you love and let go of the consequences.

Tell everyone; listen to all and discern the grace in what they say and do. And if they are given the responsibility to preserve and nourish Creation and they profess to do so, yet spend their time and energies in abusing it for selfish means, eschew them, denounce them, remove their power.

Try to see life from the other's perspective, and don't do anything to them you wouldn't want them to do to you is the wisdom of the ages. Thus Jesus, who would move the hearts of the fisherfolk, not only gets in with them, but helps them catch a boatload of fish before telling them they can fish for people. Jesus did not say to the fishers, "Come, follow me and play hockey." He said "You will be fishing." Some of us love to fish. What is it we love to do? And what is

the underlying value that goes with it? Nourishing, comforting, clothing, healing, fascinating, entertaining... Maybe that's what God put us on this earth to do.

As we were reminded last week, the time comes to put away childishness and embrace the childlike wonder and curiosity about love for which we are made. Then we will know, even as we are fully known.

Let's let the great John Donne have the last say today: "The Holy Ghost appears in such forms as may most work upon those to whom God would speak. David, was a shepherd, God took him to feed his people." The Magi of the East, were given to the study of stars, God gave them a star to be their guide to Christ at Bethlehem. To the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus preached the Water of Life. To these fellows in our text, accustomed to a joy and gladness when they took in a great store of fish, He presents his comforts agreeably to their taste; they should be fishers still. Christ makes heaven all things to all people, that God might gain them all."