

NELCSA Winter Series 2 12 July 2020

“Will we survive? -

What help is the Good News of Jesus in these times?”

Luke 5

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. 2 He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. 3 He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.” 5 Simon answered, “Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.” 6 When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break.

7 So they signalled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” 9 For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, 10 and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.” 11 So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Dear sisters and brothers,

Standing in front of a globe, I look at the continents. Then it strikes me: To see that something that started in a tiny speck on the globe could spread so fast and so vastly! From this tiny speck it now can be found on all continents, in almost every country on earth. No, I am not speaking of the Corona Virus. I am speaking of the gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. Of course, in this time, under these extraordinary circumstances I cannot avoid also mentioning COVID 19, its fast spreading and the impact that it had on all of our lives. If, six months ago, I would have told you that in July you will wear a face mask when going for shopping, that you might be carrying with you a hand sanitiser, and that you will not greet close friends and family with a hand shake or a hug, you would have thought that I am losing it. And now? It has become part of our daily routine- Face mask, waving in stead of hugging, temperature taken before entering a shop etc, etc. This drastic change of behaviour was necessary to stem the spread of a highly contagious disease, or at least to slow it down.

I find it interesting to compare the spread of Corona with the spread of the Gospel. There is a fascinating “opposing similarity”. In short: Corona is highly infectious, and behavioural change is needed to curb its spread.

The Gospel leads to behavioural change, which then becomes “contagious”, leading to the spread of the gospel!

In both, the change of behaviour plays a crucial role.

But, let us start at the beginning.

The text from Luke 5 shows us this gospel at work.

The hardened fisherman, Simon Peter, had his morning interrupted by a preacher commandeering his boat as a pulpit. As if that was not enough, this preacher then, at the end of the sermon, tells him to go deeper and throw out the nets. He clearly does not know anything about fishing. The whole night was bad already, with no catch.

I can't imagine what must have been going through Peter's head at this moment. Anger, because he finally wants to go to bed and sleep? Conflict - should he honour the pastor and do what he says, even though it is stupid? Or did he have a sense that this Jesus might surprise him?

All we know is that he agrees, clearly stating: (only) Because you say so. What happens then, takes all the expert fishers by surprise - a catch unlike all others, so that they cannot handle it on their own, but have to call the other boat.

I would have expected the hardened fisherman Simon Peter to give Jesus a firm pat on the shoulder and offer him a partnership in his fishing venture. But, in stead, he falls down and says: Go away from me, Master, for I am a sinful man!

Simon Peter suddenly realised that his world and this Jesus don't belong together, his life and Jesus are incompatible. Since this life, this work, this existence is all he has, Jesus has to leave, go and find someone who is more in line with the goodness of this Master.

And now comes the turning point, the gospel at work. Jesus says:

Do not be afraid!

The gospel in a short sentence! The Lord, who is too good to enter our existence, who should turn his back on us, turns his face towards us and says: Do not be afraid!

At other places Jesus uses different words: Your sins are forgiven! (Lk 7,48) Or: Stand up!(Jn 5,8). But the essence is the same: Jesus does not reject, but reaches out, does not destroy but lifts up. The Good News is: God and I don't belong together, but he still chooses to stay and set me free. Do not be afraid!

Peter experiences what was later recorded in the watchword for today: Ephesians 2,8: "It is by grace you have been saved, it is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."

This is the turning point in the life of Simon Peter. But it does not stop there. From "I am a sinful man" Jesus moves him to: "From now on ..."

In all of the gospels the calling of the disciples happens at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. What then follows is the training of his disciples, so that they can understand what it means to be a follower of Christ.

This sequence is important. Jesus did not first teach, and then, after three years asked: Who wants to come along? No, he calls, and then for three years shows what it means to follow.

In these three years he addresses the behaviour of the people of his time, and shows how his followers should be different. The best example of this is the sermon on the mount (Mt 5-7).

I just highlight a few points from the message of Jesus. Israel, the Jewish Nation, was under foreign rule, which was despised and hated as enemy. This hate was totally acceptable and wide-spread. It was OK to show your disdain towards these occupiers. (And, in reverse, the occupiers had no respect or regard for those whom they oppressed). Jesus turns it around and says: Love your enemy! (Mt 5, 43f). He calls his followers to a radical change of behaviour!

Next, within the Jewish community it was normal to practise: An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth - in other words: retaliation was the accepted form of justice. Jesus introduces a different behaviour: Forgive - once, twice, seven times, seventy seven times!(Mt 5, 38f, 18,22)

Another example: It was customary (as is with most humans) that "I" am first priority - my survival, my family, my friends, my future. Jesus introduces a different focus: Trusting that God cares for the "I", I can become a blessing to others!

This change of behaviour made the Good News contagious. Jesus uses different words to describe this. “You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world” he says (Mt 5,13-16). Or, at another occasion: You are the yeast that works amongst the people, spreading my kingdom (Mt 13,33). All this in the first place does not happen by words, but by the way we live, through the changed behaviour!

This turning point in the life of Peter was not absolute. No, he was the old Peter, who now had to learn to live the new life. “I am a sinful man” did not end there and then - he continued to disappoint, to fall short of his calling. The strongest illustration of this happened three years later, when Jesus appeared before Pilate, and Peter denied three times that he knew Jesus. This time, however, Peter did not ask Jesus to leave, but he disappeared, crying and ashamed. “I am a sinful man”.

However, after Easter, Peter again heard Jesus saying “Do not be afraid” - but with different words. Three times Jesus asks him: Do you love me, and each time Jesus confirms the “from now on” by saying: Feed my sheep, tend to my flock.

Even then the learning had to continue. Racism was deeply rooted in Simon Peter, and as the gospel was spreading the Lord had to work hard on Peter to overcome his prejudice and refusal to mingle with gentiles. (Acts 10). But even after this, we read that many years later Paul had to again rebuke Peter for slipping back into old racial behaviour patterns and prejudice (Galatians 2, 11-13). So, one can say that the statement “Once a Christian, always a Christian” is misleading. It should rather be: “Once a Christian, always learning to be a Christian!”

Now let us again look at the world and time that we live in. The COVID 19 crisis has brought to light serious issues, most of them existed prior to the crisis, but were perhaps not that noticeable. Globally there seems to be an increase in racism. Violence has been part of our society, but those working in hospitals share how, after the initial lock down, the inflow of victims of violence has drastically increased. Women and children continue to be abused in their homes, which should be a safe space. Crime and corruption is now eating up large portions of the funds that are supposed to alleviate COVID19 related needs.

The saddest part of this is that very often the perpetrators are Christians, who should know that what they are doing is in conflict with the teachings of Christ.

In the beginning I said that COVID19 needs to be addressed with behavioural change, in order to slow it down.

The gospel does not need to be slowed down, but rather needs to spread faster - and this too will happen through behavioural change of Christians. Will we survive? The Good News of Jesus Christ bears with it what we need to survive!

And with that I come to you and me.

Last week I pointed out that Jesus, when calling people, does so one-on-one. The calling of Peter in today's story is such an example.

Can you believe that Jesus is now speaking to you?

In the midst of all the crisis, all the chaos, Jesus is at work, and now he looks at you. You might sink lower into your chair and think: Me? Who am I to make a difference? You might even, like Peter, think: Jesus is too good for my life, for my world, for my environment - Go away, I am a sinful person!

But Jesus does not go away.

He looks at you and says: Do not be afraid! I actually really want you to be part of my work! Yes, you!

From now on ... I will show you, help you, so that your life will reflect me more than before!

Perhaps you had dedicated your life to Christ a long time ago and forgot about it. Perhaps you have tried many times and given up. Perhaps you are faced with this call for the first time?

Think of Peter. He knew for certain that he did not qualify. And yet, Jesus accepted him!

The good news is that Jesus looks at you in a different way than what you can imagine. He does not turn away, does not give up on you, but invites you: "Do not be afraid. From now on ... you will be a blessing!"

Do you accept the challenge?

Amen.

Horst Müller, Bishop NELCSA Email: hmuller@nelcsa.net

