

Epiphany 5C – Luke 5.1-11

With 22 seconds left in an AFC Divisional Playoff Game at Three Rivers Stadium, Pittsburgh trailed the Oakland Raiders , 7-6 and faced fourth-and-10 from its 40-yard line. Art Rooney, the club's owner and founder, headed down the elevator to the locker room to console his team, thereby missing one of the wackiest plays and one of the most fantastic finishes in NFL history.

Pittsburgh quarterback Terry Bradshaw dropped back to pass, and threw the ball to running back John (Frenchy) Fuqua. Fuqua, the Raiders safety and the ball converged simultaneously, and out popped the ball. The Raiders began to celebrate, not realizing that rookie running back Franco Harris, trailing the play, had picked the ball out of the air at his shoe tops and taken off down the left sideline. Some Raiders gave chase, but they could not stop Harris from running to the end zone. The Steelers won 13-7. The play has gone down in football history as the “Immaculate Reception”.

I greet you all this morning of the great high feast of Super Bowl Sunday. It is the single event of the year that binds together the hearts and minds of millions around the globe. There is great feasting and fellowship. There is singing and dancing. There is much prayer. And the theologians of this great spectacle, the Sports Writers Guild of America, are well practiced at using phrases like “The Immaculate Reception”, “The Miracle Finish”, and the “Divine Defense”. Indeed, the way that they write we might be excused for thinking that the great quarterbacks did indeed walk on water.

But I will do my best to keep you from your revelry just a bit longer by drawing your attention to the Gospel according to Luke, in which we find that Luke was himself quite interested in miracles. For he wrote, “When Jesus had ceased speaking he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” And when they had done this, they enclosed a great shoal of fish; and as their nets were breaking, they beckoned to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, for he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the catch of fish which they had taken.” Whether it be the wind and the waves

or the fishes in the sea, Jesus commanded miraculous power. And it was that miraculous display of power that attracted people to Jesus. It was the poor, the sick and the demon possessed who came out to see him at first. It was only once the word of him had spread that the religious leaders of the day came to see him and to hear his message. But what are we to make of these miracles performed by Jesus? What role or function do they play in teaching us about Jesus? Was he simply a man who was starved for attention, performing these minstrel acts by slight of hand in order to gain some reputation for himself? Or was he some kind of shaman, a medicine man, a faith healer? Each of these has been proposed in seminaries and in print, but they fail to recognize the purpose of Jesus' miracles. The healing power of Jesus shows him to be the Christ, the anointed, the chosen one of the most high God. Jesus' miracles are the *bona fides*, the authority to preach the message, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel."

Jesus' healing power showed him to have authority. Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus was asked, why are you doing these things? The priests in the Temple asked him, "By what authority do you do

these things?” And again, when he was preaching the coming of the Kingdom in Capernaum, men lowered the paralytic on his bed through the roof of the house. And when Jesus saw their faith he looked at the paralyzed man and proclaimed, “My son, your sins are forgiven.” Now in the crowd there were religious teachers called the Scribes who heard him forgive the man’s sins. Who can forgive sins other than God? No one’s sins may be forgiven unless they go to the priests in the Temple, and offer the appointed sacrifice for the remission of that sin. By claiming to forgive the man’s sins, Jesus had taken to himself the prerogative of the priests and the function of the whole Temple sacrificial system. As the saying goes, Jesus had gone from preaching to meddling! He had spoken blasphemously against the Holy Place and the priests of the Lord.

But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, asked them a question. Is it easier to forgive sins or to heal disease? You want to know who has authority – is it the Temple and its priests or is it Jesus of Nazareth? Seeing that they had no answer he said, “But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins” – he said to the paralytic – “I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home”. The

man rose, tucked his mattress under his arm and left the house! Jesus had healed him, and the people marveled that such power had been given to a man. And yet, what dear friends, is more marvelous in this story? Is it more marvelous that a man, crippled and bed ridden should get up and walk? Or is it more marvelous that Jesus had shown in that healing miracle his authority to release all those who believe in him from the power of sin and proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven?

And Jesus healing power not only showed him to have authority to preach the repentance and forgiveness of sins, but it showed him to be the Christ, the Messiah, the long expected Savior. The Gospel according to Matthew tells us that, “when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me.” Here, dear friends, is John Baptist rotting in Herod’s jail. He is bound

in chains for proclaiming the coming of the Lord's Messiah, the Christ. If the Messiah had come, he was the rightful king, and Herod was a puppet and usurper. John was dangerous and so he was in prison. But what if he had been wrong? What could make wrongful incarceration worse except the creeping doubt that everything you had lived for had been a mistake? He had nothing left to live for, except to hope in the promised Messiah. And so he sends his disciples to Jesus to ask him, are you the Lord's anointed one? And Jesus gives no answer, but points them to his healing power. Jesus says to them, "Tell John what you have seen here today".

Should John have been comforted by such a response? Would the prophet trapped in a dungeon rejoice to hear this report? He would if he knew the prophet Isaiah. For Jesus offered the testimony of Isaiah in answer to John's question. Isaiah had prophesied to a broken and rebellious people. They had rejected the Lord their God, and the Lord sent Isaiah to them to proclaim their coming exile in Babylon. The nation of Israel would die and her children would be led away in chains. What hope, dear friends? What comfort in such a grim proclamation? Would they be lost in a dungeon, like John Baptist,

forever? No, for the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. There would be redemption if they would but confess their sins and return to the Lord. And what would be the sign that their exile had ended? The Lord would return to them and would send his Servant to heal them of all their diseases. For Isaiah says, “Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.” Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy.” The salvation of the Lord would come when he forgave his people of their sins. The sign of his forgiveness would be that he would heal their diseases: the blind would see; the lame would walk. So Jesus points to his own healing power as evidence that John need not doubt any longer. Jesus was the Messiah, for he had come to forgive the sins of the world.

Jesus healing power showed that he had authority to forgive sins, but more than that it showed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ who

would reconcile the whole world from slavery to sin. His message of repentance, conversion and faith is the same today as it was 2000 years ago. You must repent of your sins; you must give over your rebellion and follow Jesus; you must believe in him alone for your salvation. His healing power, his ability to perform “immaculate resurrections” demands a response from us, even this day. His disciples heard his call and followed him. The Chief priests and Pharisees heard his call and handed him over to the Romans for crucifixion. None were indifferent, and neither are we.

Faith in Jesus Christ is not simply an acknowledgement that Jesus had power to pick a fine fishing spot. I know that we have avid fishermen in this parish. Because of the advancement of technology today’s anglers have sonar in their boats that can find the fish hiding in the watery depths. But it would be hard to conclude from this that we should have faith in our sonar equipment. That we should fall down before it and worship it, even though it works with great efficiency to bring in that prize bass. But Simon Peter’s reaction in our Gospel lesson is instructive. Having fished all night he had caught nothing. With a word, this man Jesus had caused so great a shoal of

fish to leap in their nets that they were tearing apart and the boats were being swamped. Simon's untutored instinct was the right one: he, like Moses, had come into the presence of a heavenly power. Jesus was no burning bush, but he could bring nature to obedience with a word. Peter said to Jesus, "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man." Peter's faith led him to confess Jesus' divinity, to confess his own mortality, and to fall down and worship.

We too must believe in Jesus and follow him. For he who raised up nets full of fishes was himself raised up from the dead by the mighty arm of his heavenly Father. In him we shall never be disappointed.

Though death and Satan opposed him, on the third day he rose from the cold tomb. If these ancient enemies have been defeated, there are none that can oppose our Lord Jesus Christ. It is because of him, and through faith in his blood that our souls are cleansed from sin and hope that at the Last Day we shall receive a body that shall never pass away. For St. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." So then, we who have received all things

at his hands, let us also be fishers of men. Let us bring in the nations
to serve him. AMEN.