

Drop It

January 22, 2023

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Do you remember the comic strip Peanuts? Of course you do! Charlie Brown and the gang are iconic, and even though Charles Schultz died more than 20 years ago, kids can still identify Snoopy today.

A few years ago on Christmas, I reflected extensively on “A Charlie Brown Christmas.” Even though I used it as an example a few years ago, I thought I’d share it again in part, because it’s just a really good image, and in part because I’m conscious that a good amount of what I say doesn’t actually take up space in your brains.

(Don’t get me wrong, I’m not being self-deprecating here. Science will back me up that we don’t remember the majority of what we hear. So, think of my sharing of this image again as a foray into brain-based learning.)

In case you haven’t seen “A Charlie Brown Christmas” in a while, I’ll recap the general plot: Everyone is making Christmas preparations. They’re stringing popcorn and wrapping presents, and they all are getting on one another’s nerves. No one, and I mean no one, is connecting with Charlie, who gets to the Christmas tree lot late, only to find only one, scraggly, forlorn tree left. It’s pitiful, and droops when he puts just one ornament on it.

The whole show seems quite depressing, really, until Linus, (you remember Linus, the little boy with the security blanket), stands up on the stage and proclaims the Christmas story, and everyone remembers the true meaning of Christmas. What you may not have noticed, even if you’ve watched the special every year since it debuted in 1965, is that when Linus stands up to proclaim the Good News of great joy, he drops his security blanket.

In my Christmas sermon a few years ago, I went on to explore how, in the incarnation, God drops all of the security of divinity to become one of us. Today, I invite you to connect Linus dropping his security blanket with Peter and Andrew and James and John dropping their nets.

The Scriptures

In our Gospel reading today, we hear of Jesus calling the first disciples. Each of the Gospels tells this story a little differently, even though the main point is the same. What is interesting in Matthew’s telling of the story is that the two sets of brothers are called while they’re at work. And something that I think is often overlooked is that it’s good work. As fishers with their own boats and nets, Peter, Andrew, James, and John are solidly middle class. They’ve got steady, reliable jobs, are owners of the means of production, and Jesus comes into the midst of this, invites them to follow him, and they drop everything and do so.

I bring this up because, often, people imagine that the disciples were called away from dead-end lives. People imagine the disciples’ lives were empty or rough, and Jesus took them away from all of that.

Not so in this telling of the story. They were in the family business, and in James and John's case, we know that it's at least second generation.

This is interesting for you and for me because the invitation to follow Jesus isn't always some... "come to Jesus meeting" in which someone is in bad straights and needs to get their life back on track. Following the pattern of the first disciples, the invitation to follow Jesus comes to us normal, middle-class people as we're going about our day. AND, back to Linus dropping his security blanket, taking up the invitation to follow Jesus means letting some things go.

In fact, taking up the invitation to follow Jesus inevitably includes letting go of some things. Sometimes, following Jesus means letting go of some of our comforts – living simply, so others might simply live. Sometimes, following Jesus means letting go of our privilege.

We celebrated the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. last week, who was really inviting us all into creating the reign of God here on earth. King was paraphrasing Jesus when he said that as long as our society is based on haves and have nots, on some people being powerful leaving others powerless, it will not reflect the values of God. Sometimes, following Jesus means letting go of our privilege as we seek to align ourselves more fully with the way that God intends the world to work.

And, sometimes, what following Jesus calls us to let go of are our internal attitudes and self talk and coping mechanisms that keep us caught in a world view that isn't centered on grace. To understand what I mean by this, I invite you to turn back to the Call to Worship found in your bulletins:

- Leave behind what shrivels your spirit and follow the lush lure of the Life-Giving God.
- Leave behind the coldness of shoulds and follow the warmth of Inner Wisdom.
- Leave behind the hollowness of image and follow the rich depth of Beauty.
- Leave behind toxic positivity and follow mourning, soulful and honest.
- Leave behind holding it all together and follow that which breaks your heart open into a field of wildflowers.

The Psalm that Jeremy read as our Hebrew scripture lesson today starts out by describing God as our light, our salvation, and our refuge. It can be scary to drop our security blankets, to drop our nets, to let go of what is as we seek to follow God's invitation into what can be.

By describing God as our light, our salvation, and our refuge, what the Psalm reminds us is that, no matter our circumstance, God is right here in our midst

- as our light, illuminating our way,
- as our salvation, saving us from misfortune,
- and as our refuge, that place of safety to which we can turn.

As the Psalm says, "the LORD is our light, our salvation, and our refuge, of what shall we be afraid?"

Conclusion

Friends, if you've been listening to me for a while, you may have noticed that I don't preach much about sacrifice, largely because it has been so tangled up in bad theology over the years. But the truth is, this call to drop our nets is really a call to sacrifice. It's a call to let go of something in order to put our lives into the service of something greater.

One of my favorite stories of sacrifice is that of Louis Pasteur. Most of us probably associate him with the process of food preservation named after him, pasteurization. What you may not realize is that he also developed the vaccine for rabies. The story goes that he believed that he had developed a cure, but being unwilling to inflict possible harm on others, he experimented on himself, suffering greatly.

“Then a nine-year-old boy named Joseph Meister was bitten by a rabid dog. Because Pasteur had been willing to risk his own life, the boy's mother begged him to try his new treatment on her son. Pasteur injected the boy for 10 days, and the child survived. Decades later, when Louis Pasteur died after a long and productive life, he asked for three words to be engraved on his headstone: ‘Joseph Meister Lived.’” (Mike Piazza)

Few of us will have the opportunity to make a sacrifice as influential as experimenting on ourselves as we develop the rabies vaccine, but each of us is called, in our own small way, to sacrifice, to let go of something – our ego, our pride, our privilege, our outmoded worldview that is keeping us stuck in grace-less patterns.

In “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” after Linus has finished proclaiming the Good News of Great Joy, he picks up his security blanket again. Many of us do that, too. We encounter God's transforming love, we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, and then allow our fears and anxieties to creep back in again. Or we lay aside our privilege, only to pick it up again when the stakes are high.

One of the challenges of a life of following Jesus is to consistently remind ourselves to drop our nets, to allow love incarnate to shape our actions, instead of our built-up defenses. Linus picks up his security blanket, but if you remember the special, he then wraps it around Charlie Brown's little forlorn tree, and that act of kindness, that act of caring for another, makes the tree stand up straight and sparkle.

As we model ourselves on the Gospels, my prayer for us this week is that we will all have the courage and the wisdom to let go, to leave our nets, our security blankets, to sacrifice. In doing so, I have the utmost confidence that our lives will sparkle, and will draw others to Christ's ways. Then, just as the Gospel says, we will be fishing for people. May it be so. Alleluia, and Amen.

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