

Epiphany 5 – C
February 4, 2007
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The first time I went kayaking in the San Juan Islands in WA State, I was on a group tour with a local outfitter. We had about a five minute lesson and then the trip leader said: “Time to go!” Off we went into the beautiful waters off of San Juan Island. It was a little scary at first. Although I had been canoeing many times, I had never been in a kayak and being that low in the water was a bit disarming. But soon I was in love with this sport and have been kayaking ever since. The trip was a Whaling Watching tour of the San Juans and our hope was indeed to see the famous Orca whales that inhabit that area. It was three days long and by the end of the second day we had seen lots of wonderful things but had somehow missed the orca whales. And then as we were eating our dinner on the beach someone came running into the campground shouting: “The whales are coming! The whales are coming!” I understood later that this meant that the whales which follow a certain path were heading our way. Our trip leader shouted to us to drop everything and head to our kayaks. Somehow I ended up with one of the leaders who also happened to be the trip photographer. He said: “Paddle hard!” as we headed straight out into the sound. Then he said something which made my heart stop: “We need to be right in the path of the whales so I can get the best pictures possible.” Here I was a nice young woman from the east coast, having been in the Northwest for all of six months, never before having encountered anything larger than a crab in my adventures in the sea. We reached the middle of the whale path and sat. And then the whales came, sky hopping all around us, within twelve feet of our little kayak. The trip leader said: “Don’t worry, they won’t hit us. They have highly developed sonar equipment and know exactly where we are.” I had little choice but to place all of my confidence in this young man whom I barely knew. But I decided to do so and just enjoy a magnificent and as yet unparalleled experience of whale watching. Since that time, I have seen lots of whales in Hawaii, Mexico and the Northwest, but nothing has come close to that day in Puget Sound.

In today’s gospel reading we have the familiar story of Simon Peter resisting Jesus’ suggestion that he try to go fishing once again even though his initial attempts had met nothing but failure. Peter had already been out fishing, all night in fact, but to no avail. Did he in his sleep deprived state really want to head back out into the water? Remember in Jesus’ day, fishing was a hit or miss proposition. They didn’t have any of those sophisticated gadgets that tell you whether or not you have come into contact with a school of fish. No they just had to keep at it until they found what they were looking for.

So Peter whines...if you don’t already know Peter was a great whiner: “We worked all night and didn’t get anything. But if you say so, we will try again.” They, of course, as the story tells us, go out and catch so many fish that they now run the risk of sinking the boat. All happy, they return to shore and then we have the clincher, Jesus tells them: “Now you will be fishers of people.” No whining here, Peter along with his fishing partners James and John leave everything and follow Jesus. We have a great big attitude change in this exchange. No questions asked, these guys are ready to roll.

So what has happened here? Why are they suddenly willing to drop everything and follow Jesus? It is because they have begun to trust Jesus. This is still early in their relationship with him but

they have clearly had one rather dramatic and positive experience with them that has begun to show them that perhaps Jesus might know what he is doing, that Jesus just might be a leader they can follow.

This story among other things is a story about trust. Trust is not something that comes easily to people. In fact, the reality is we live in a culture of suspicion. We have to be careful and not let the culture of suspicion put unnecessary impediments in the way. Too much suspicion slows us down.

A week ago at this very time, I was in sunny California attending a conference at All Saints Episcopal Church in Beverly Hills. They have been having these conferences for several years. I went to the first in 2004 which was terrific and then to this one which was equally worthwhile. And if we can scrape together some funding, I'd love for a team from St. John's to go next year with Deacon Peter. There were so many great things about this conference that I could not begin to cover them here but there is one that is closely connected to today's reading. One of the many things I observed was the high level of trust between the rector Carol Anderson and the members of the congregation. It was beautiful to observe. Because of that high level of trust, they are now able to move in some very courageous directions. Carol describes All Saints as a healthy but sleepy church when she began her ministry there in 1985. Now some 19 years later, they are on fire. This is one of the happiest and most spirit led congregations I have ever encountered. There is strong lay leadership. But it didn't just happen. It involved a lot of work and attention to develop the gifts for ministry that are contained within that congregation. The length of the pastoral relationship has also been a major factor. As I said in my annual meeting address, nothing can replace the shared history between a rector and her congregation. And history, by its very nature, takes time.

Wednesday night, I was at the celebration of new ministry for Shannon McVan-Brown and her new congregation St. Matthew's and St. Joseph's in Detroit. It was a wonderful service not just because of the liturgy, not just because of the incredible thurifer who swings his thurible like no one I have ever seen. I mean the place was thick with holy smoke. But the greatest level of excitement came from the evident love between rector and congregation that is beginning to develop. The first blush of love is always a great thing to witness whether it is between two lovers or between a rector and her congregation. I was reminded of our celebration of new ministry in which the preacher, Linda Northcraft talked about how the rector/congregational relationship is like breaking in a new pair of shoes. The longer the relationship goes on the more comfortable the shoes become. By now, being the smart and wise people you are, you have figured out where my gifts are and where they are not. And I am beginning to understand where your gifts are and where they are not. Our collective work is to support each other in our strengths and offer our gifts in areas where they are clearly needed.

At the vestry retreat this weekend, some wonderful gifts emerged from our vestry members. There is one topic on which we have been spinning our wheels and finally one of our younger members stood up and said: "This is the process we need to do to work through this topic." It was awesome. The level of mutual trust is increasing all of the time.

When Peter, James and John dropped everything to follow Jesus, trust had already been established. Peter has just had an experience that allowed him to let go of any suspicions that he

might have had and simply follow. This doesn't mean that the relationship between Peter and Jesus was completely smooth from that day on. We know better than that. We know that in Jesus' final hours, Peter denied even knowing Jesus. What we do know is that they stayed in relationship.

In a world in which people move around a lot, trust is difficult to establish. The fact is that there is little that can replace shared history and longevity of relationship. In the meantime, all of us are doing what we can to foster a high level of trust. You and I are working on that; the vestry is working on that with each other and with me; the staff and I are working on this and we are all working together to establish trust and faithfulness among each other. Like Peter, James and John, our faith in Christ is what molds and shapes our lives. But it is our experience with each other that allows us to trust.