

Text Luke 5:1-11

"Woe to me!" I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." These are the words that Isaiah confessed when God called him to speak the Word of the Lord to Israel. The Lord had a harsh prophecy for the people of Israel. The Word would be preached, but the people's hearts were hardened and calloused. Their land would be ruined and they would be sent away to exile. Isaiah realized that his lips were just as unclean as his fellow Israelites. Worse he was unclean and in the presence of the Lord Almighty. Not a good place for a sinner to be. Just like Moses could not directly see the Glory of the Lord and expect to live, Isaiah faced the terrifying prospect that he had met his end.

Isaiah's confession is my confession as well. It is why I faced the altar when I spoke that confession. That was no mere symbolic act, no mere illustration. It was spoken from the realization that on my own I am unworthy to speak for the Lord on His behalf. My silent prayer before I preach is from Psalm 19: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD." I don't know what Pastor Fouts prays before he preaches, but I am sure it echoes the same sentiment as the Psalmist. Preaching the Word of the Lord is a scary proposition for me. Part of it is certainly the fear of speaking in public. But a major part is knowing that I am like the people to whom I am preaching the Word. I am sinner by nature, and the sins that I confront you with are some of the same ones that I commit. These words may be scandalous for you. That the preacher is not just inclined to sin, but actually commits sin. I have sinned in thought, word, and deed. "Woe to me! I am ruined!"

For you see I left the church for eighteen years. I did not go and live a life of debauchery and unchasteness, but yet I lived an unrepentant life. A life that could in no way be called Christian. My sins may have been mild compared to what some are doing these days, but yet I was not a basically good person, my heart was full of evil. I left in the middle of confirmation because I did not think the church had anything to say to me. I denied the gift that the Holy Spirit gave me in Baptism. I denigrated the work that Christ accomplished on the cross. I trampled it underfoot and tossed it in the garbage. I set myself up as a god and decided what was good and evil. This is the chief sin, and like St. Paul I confess I am the worst of sinners. I do not deserve God's mercy and in no way do I feel I deserve to be up here preaching the Word of the Lord. Scripture also informs us that those who teach and preach will be held to a higher standard than others. "Woe to me! I am ruined."

In today's Gospel lesson we have the same situation, but framed a little differently. At the start of the reading we have Jesus teaching the people. Up to this point it was solely Jesus who was preaching and teaching the Word of God. His disciples had not yet been called to do this work. Jesus had identified himself with sinners at His baptism. He came to call sinners and not the righteous. Sinners were Jesus' business. Not only was He here to bring sinners into the Kingdom of God, He was also here to involve sinners in His ministry. Not only were the righteous excluded from the Kingdom of God, but they were excluded from Jesus' ministry. The righteous Pharisee's thought they were clean. But they were only outwardly clean. Their hearts were unclean, and so what is in one's heart is on one's lips. The righteous are not fit to enter the Kingdom of God or to preach its coming.

Jesus makes this point very clear. When He instructs the disciples to throw the nets over, He is not showing what catching men will be like. What Jesus is doing is revealing to the disciples that they are in God's presence. Who else could provide such a bounteous catch, where before there was nothing? Only God can create out of nothing. The disciples and their companions were not merely overjoyed, rather they were astonished. This catch was not something in the realm of their normal experience. This is a burning bush incident. This is God on Mount Sinai. This is God leading His people Israel out of Egypt. St. Peter understands immediately in whose presence he stands. This is why he kneels in Jesus' presence and says, "Go away from me Lord; I am a sinful man." Like Isaiah he is in the presence of the Lord Almighty, but unlike Isaiah he is not ruined. Jesus calms their fears and tells them that from now on they will be fishers of men. Sinners are to be the ones who will preach the Gospel.

This is good news for you and for me. The righteous have nothing to say to you or to me. They have no need of redemption. And if they have no need of redemption then they have no need to preach the Gospel. Where would that leave you and me on judgment day? We would be left saying, "Woe is me. I am ruined!" But thanks be to God that Jesus came to utter these words on behalf of sinners. When He was in the garden he prayed, "Father, if you are willing take this cup from me, yet not my will, but yours be done." He knew that He was to take on the sin of the world, and for that He would be forsaken of God. He knew by this act that He would be ruined. But by this act He redeemed sinners. Sinners now have value to God, and only they can proclaim the gift that He has given to the world. The righteous know nothing of this gift and they have no need of a God who redeems, rather only sinners who have been redeemed by Christ's

sacrifice on the cross know this. And this is you and me. Only we can be astonished by the mercy that God has on us and on others.

This is why you were able to call Pastor Fouts into your midst and have him preach the Gospel to you. He is a sinner. If he was not he would be no good to you. If he was not a sinner he could not stand in this pulpit and call you to repentance and believe the Gospel because these would be foreign concepts to him. Yes, a preacher is to have certain qualities as we read in 1 Timothy 3: “Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.” Just to name a few. However as a redeemed sinner he knows and treasures Christ as a gift of God, and he daily feeds you with this gift. Because your Pastor is a redeemed sinner he can preach without fear, but certainly with reverent fear. And I too, a redeemed sinner can likewise preach without fear, but certainly with reverent fear.

This is a sinful world full of sinful beings. God has redeemed the world and us, so that they can serve His purposes. This is a great scandal to many people. But that is not so with us. We confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean and deserve God’s present and eternal punishment. However, we also confess that as redeemed people of God we can delight in His will and walk in His ways. Christ instituted the pastoral office so that the Gospel could be preached that some may be saved and that their faith be edified. Thanks be to God that He has entrusted this gift with jars of clay. Amen.