

Trusting the Other Side

Luke 5:1-11

Since her death, Maya Angelou has been greatly celebrated around the world as a poet, a prophet, a celebrity, and a grand dame. She was also a lifelong follower of Jesus.

Raised in Stamps, Arkansas, by her grandmother, Maya spent much of her childhood within the warm embrace of a small African Methodist Episcopal Church — at least six hours each Sunday according to her own writing. In the last half of her life, she lived in Winston Salem, North Carolina, and was a steadfast member of a black Baptist Church.

And yet despite this religious pedigree, Maya Angelou could be very critical of the church. In one of her books, she wrote a poem titled “Savior,” where she laments the petulance of priests and the boredom of ritual. She also stresses our need for Jesus to visit us again.

She drew a distinction between Jesus and the church. Though we as the church are called to be the resurrected Body of Christ on earth, all too often we substitute the institution of the church for the incarnation of Christ. Too often we turn Christ’s organic body into the static structure of organization.

As established Protestant churches in America continue to diminish and decline, I can sympathize with Angelou’s despair about the tedium of too many rituals and a desire to strive for a fresh visitation from Jesus and a re-acquaintance with his holy name.

In 2007, American Theologian Leonard Sweet wrote a book called *The Gospel According to Starbucks*. In it Sweet lifts up Starbucks as one of the capitalist wonders of the modern world and insists that the church has much to learn from the neighborhood coffee hangout.

The philosophy of the founder of Starbucks is simple. For him, selling coffee is his *Grand Passion*, except that it’s not about coffee. Starbucks is not a coffee shop — it’s a lifestyle. It’s what Sweet calls “a third place” — a place that every human being needs — a place of comfort and community and connection. It’s a place beyond home and work.

Church used to be that third place for most Americans, but less and less so these days. Instead the music, the techy comfort, the quiet neighborhood hubbub of the neighborhood coffee shop has become a place where strangers become friends. And, Sweet suggests, if Jesus showed up tomorrow, he’d be more comfortable in Starbucks than in most of our churches.

I agree with Maya Angelou - that we need Jesus to visit us again. That we need to rediscover the radical, rich, and real power that the living Christ offers us inside the church and outside these walls.

Rather than a bland buddy or pious preacher, the Jesus we read about in scripture is more of a bold barista preparing the unique jolt of spiritual caffeine each of us needs to live our lives fully. And what the church at its best can offer us is not comfort and complacency, but commitment, connection, and conviction.

And this is the kind of Jesus we meet in Luke’s gospel story for today.

The more I read Luke's account of the calling of the disciples, the more astonished I am at the *chutzpah* Jesus has as he acts. Here he is, a restless wandering preacher, done with his father's carpentry shop, and freshly kicked out of town by the neighbors he grew up with. He was kicked out because he proclaimed himself the Messiah — not a Messiah for the chosen few, but the Messiah for all the messy masses.

On that morning that we read about in our lesson we find him walking by the sea, fending off adoring crowds, looking for a few good people to help him turn the world upside down.

It's important to remember that Simon Peter, James, and John are professional fishermen. They're good at what they do and know all the tricks of the trade. Any decent fisherman knows that you never fish close to shore because the only fish stupid enough to flirt with the rocky shore are guppies and tadpoles.

Because of the fluid movement of muscle needed to haul in a big catch, the nets are always thrown from one particular side of the boat. When Jesus sees these three brawny, frustrated men come to shore after a night of nothing, he calls out to them.

He tells them to do everything their fishing experience has taught them is wrong — toss their nets into the shallow water from the wrong side of the boat. And according to our text, Peter, John, and James trust Jesus. They obey Jesus. They do what years of training and custom have forbidden them ever to do before.

This electric interaction with Jesus is the only officer training these disciples ever had. They trust and obey. They take a risk. And from that moment on they follow Jesus on his Don Quixote quest to catch people for God. Most everything they learn to do while wandering by his side turns conventional wisdom on its ear.

Love your enemies, don't hurt them. Focus on the poor and let the rich fend for themselves. Touch lepers, don't shun them. Invite women into the community of discipleship, don't keep them barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen.

Let the little children come forward and bless them with all their noise and energy and interruptions. Honor the authority of Caesar, but give true allegiance to God. Suffer willingly in order to bring healing to others. Don't fear death, for it's only when a seed dies that healthy grain can grow.

Not only does Jesus turn fishing wisdom on its ear, he turns living wisdom on its ear. If we want to be disciples of this bold barista of rich, hot, caffeinated faith, then we need to turn the wisdom of our contemporary world on its ear too.

No matter how long we've been a good Christian, there are times when Jesus asks us to move beyond our comfort zone. There are times when Jesus asks us to "do church" in ways that turn upside down "the way we have always done it."

There are times when Jesus walks along the edge of this community and calls us out to:

Trust him. Obey the radical demands of the gospel. Risk doing new things in new ways. Cast our nets on the other side of the boat — trusting that fresh grace and abundance mercy will come tumbling into this place.

In trying to infuse the church with the best learning from the Starbucks strategy, Leonard Sweet has come up with the anagram E-P-I-C. EPIC. He suggests that vital churches in the twenty-first century must be EPIC churches.

E stands for experiential. Peter and James and John did not understand discipleship until they did it. We Presbyterians think too much and experience too little. Instead of thinking about prayer, why don't we just pray?

Instead of wishing that we had more children in our pews or more people in our congregation, why not go out, find them, invite them, and welcome them? Any educator will tell you that children learn by doing, not by listening. Friends let us experience our faith first and then we will discover what we really believe.

P stands for participatory. There's no way that Peter could have hauled in all those fish by himself. He needed the other men in his boat to help him. And even then with all of them pulling with all their might they barely managed to capture all that abundance.

Kierkegaard aptly suggested that in Christian worship the "audience" is God — and we — you and I — are the actors. We're all playing various parts in acting out the drama of scripture.

Rather than listening to a concert by the choir or the postlude by the organist, we're all called to make music and participate together - to sing, to clap, to feel the gospel in our bones and our blood.

Rather than always having the Elders serve communion as we sit in the pew, we're called to participate in communion by intinction where people actually get up and walk forward and offering themselves to God.

When we participate — when each of us acts out the various parts of worship — it becomes part of our bodies and souls and not just some passive entertainment for our minds.

I stands for image rich. Images, metaphors, stories, visual art, banners, colors, water, bread, wine, instruments, poetry, video clips – all images that are rich and rewarding and welcome. More and more worship and education is becoming a goldmine for the senses and the imagination. God cannot be fully captured by words or doctrines. Jesus is a person, not an idea - and the more we utilize images, the more the Spirit can enliven our hearts.

C is for connection. This is not just the "friendly" connections at coffee hour but the more intimate connections of heart-to-heart relationships and of taking off our masks. This is the connection of trusting that our brothers and sisters in Christ want to really know us and that we can trust both our joys and our sorrow, our successes and our failures into each other's keeping.

A truly connected church is one which is not just bound together with those inside these walls but also bound together with those outside these walls — our neighbors, those who are different, and those who are in need.

One of the enduring images for me from the tumultuous week in Ferguson, Missouri, was the picture of 100 volunteers from five local churches who banded together to reach out to their community.

The morning after the first night of rioting, they arrived outside the looted stores to clean up the glass, to reach out to the protestors, to get to know their neighbors. They made a connection with strangers in order to become friends.

So, there you have it. EPIC — experiential, participatory, image-rich, and connected — a caffeinated, committed, community of disciples — trusting, obeying, risking — all to the glory of God.

This is my dream for us, my prayer for us, as we move forward on our journey as Christ's people, so that our life together be as comfortable as an old shoe, and as mysterious as a Chinese puzzle. Amen.