

In the Boat
Lent I
Luke 5:1-11
February 21, 2010

I hate to bring this subject up, especially in such dignified company as yourselves, but one's innermost musings sometimes comes to the fore. I ask you just to bear with me in this instance. Here is the awful truth: Angelina Jolie perplexes me. There. I've said it. Angelina Jolie perplexes me.

Long before Brad Pitt and their six children, Angelina came onto the movie scene in her own right with the movie *Girl, Interrupted*. Winona Ryder starred in that movie, but the relatively unknown Angelina Jolie walked away with that year's Oscar for Best Supporting Actress. That was 1999. Next year at the Oscar ceremony Jolie's brother escorted her down the red carpet. On the red carpet they shared more than a traditional kiss between siblings. Lest you think that I exaggerate, you can look it up on the internet - unfortunately. Pretty soon after she kissed her brother she hooked up with Billy Bob Thornton. They got tattoos with each other's names on them. They wore a vial of each other's blood around their necks. Eventually they got married, but they dated longer than they were married.

During the Billy Bob phase Jolie filmed *Tomb Raider* in Cambodia. For the first time in her life she witnesses abject poverty and the plight of refugees. She turned to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for an explanation for what she saw. That led her to become a United Nations Goodwill Ambassador. The overall experience also led her to adopt Maddox, a child from Cambodia. The relationship with Billy Bob dissolved. Almost two years later she and Brad Pitt fell in love while they made a movie together. Of course Brad Pitt left his wife, Jennifer Aniston, to be with Angelina. They've been together for five years and have adopted two more children and conceived three biological children. They have a residence in New Orleans. Brad Pitt created an organization that helps residents of his adopted city to be able to have access to affordable housing.

I'm not thrilled with the whole Angelina-Brad hook-up. She insists that she would never sleep with a married man because her father (Jon Voight) cheated on her mother, but I can't see how not cheating physically is actually that high of a moral standard when you're party to a romance that causes the dissolution of a marriage. That's not cool. That's not OK under any circumstances with a Christian understanding of marriage or of a covenanted relationship.

Although I didn't list nearly all of her trips, Angelina Jolie's track record of visiting hot spots of poverty, depravity, social upheaval, war, and devastation is significant. She is not a celebrity dilettante inviting cameras to enhance her imagine. She has traveled to seriously underserved populations. She speaks with local people. Her commitment to these folks and these causes spans almost a decade. Her latest trip was to Haiti and it made it into a pretty good size article in this week's *People* magazine. While I don't approve of Brad Pitt's callous handling of his marriage, I very much approve of his sustained commitment to New Orleans. Americans are always so fond of the cause du jour. It's a radically countercultural action and a real mark of maturity of purpose to provide services and intervention long after the immediate popularity and

fervor have subsided. Too many Americans have forgotten Katrina and the people affected by Katrina. This is good work.

What perplexes me is: what made Angelina Jolie turn from the woman who wore tight, black leather all the time and who wore a necklace of her husband's blood into the woman who uses her time and her celebrity to highlight the cause of injustice and who clearly cherishes her children? That's a fairly big swing of the pendulum.

What causes us to change? What kinds of catalysts are particularly effective in re-routing all of us who are deeply entrenched in our habits and our beliefs? What causes us to forego our priorities that are based on safety and security to launch into a new lifestyle and a new perspective which are more daring, less convenient, and less self-interested than who we were before?

Due to the chaos caused by the snow we are going to begin our Lenten dramas next week. That's one week later than usual. Although that's a good decision and a necessary decision, I am disadvantaged in my preaching to make more overt connections between today's sermon and the Lenten theme. This year's Lenten theme is "In the Garden." "In the Garden" is somewhat based on the beloved hymn by that name. That hymn portrays a peaceful, idyllic time spent with Jesus. In it all is goodness and light. At some point between last Easter and this fall I thought to myself how our favorite hymn depicts a scene that's markedly contrasting with the events that occurred in the Garden of Gethsemane. After Jesus and the disciples ate the last supper together, they went as was Jesus' custom to the Mount of Olives, a part of which is the Garden of Gethsemane. In that brief time together Jesus prayed so hard that his sweat became like drops of blood. He also endured bitter things in that garden such as his disciples falling asleep, his betrayal, an act of violence committed by one of his disciples against a slave, and a deafening silent "no" from the Godhead to God's only Son that would have spared his life. The garden was a bitter place long before it became a place of solace. Part of what I'm doing today is trying to establish the link between earlier parts of Jesus' ministry with the garden.

Today the text describes a miraculous catch of fish. Oddly enough, this story is so not about the preponderance of fish. It's about the foundation of the relationship between Jesus and the disciples. Sure, absolutely, they were astounded by the miracle of the fish. More than that they were completely won over by the encounter with the man. Isn't that the thing? Isn't that the thing that usually changes us? It's the people and it's the experiences that we share with those people that cause us to grow, to evolve, to become active, and to take the risks that we once would not have taken. In short, how do we change? How do we become disciples? I think that the answer is more than we meet Jesus. I think that the answer is more like-- we experience Jesus.

We're not so much ancient middle eastern fishermen in a boat and Jesus is not so much in flesh appearing nowadays. So what do I mean when I say that we experience Jesus? First of all everyone experiences Jesus differently from each other and everyone experiences Jesus differently throughout their lifetime. One of the original reasons for the Lenten dramas is that a pastor can't reinvent the wheel in worship all year round. So I throw all my time and energy into enhancing the worship with drama usually for six weeks, this year for five. As Ed Lanehart said "I like something different. Change is good." Whereas I like ritual, he likes difference. Experiencing Jesus is certainly found in both. Some find Jesus during worship; other find Jesus during solitary walks or journaling. Many of us find Jesus through the work and witness of those we encounter

throughout our lives. Our parents, grandparents, other relatives, our friends, our partner, our children, even our co-workers. Sometimes their light for Christ shines and burns so brightly that we cannot help be uplifted and warmed. In my experience as a pastor almost always the best way to find Jesus in each other is to work together on a meaningful project. Mission work, mission activity, and other cooperative projects tend to bring people together like nothing else.

I had to chat with John Deckenback, our conference minister, about a few things in January. He and I talked about church growth for a pretty good while. In typical John Deckenback fashion he recommended half a dozen books to me. One I took home from his office and the other I ordered from Barnes & Noble. So this past week I finally read the introduction to one of those books, I Refuse to Serve a Dying Church. I'll probably read the rest of the book, but right now I don't believe that this guy's thesis is the secret to the universe like John thinks that he is. He suggests that every church needs an apostolic leader (like Paul) who takes a gregarious, concentrated invitational approach toward making church an inviting commodity to those outside the church. He assures his readers that any personality type can become this kind of effective, apostolic leader. He said that the only qualification that a person needs to be this kind of effective, apostolic leader is to have an authentic encounter with Jesus the Christ and to be willing to share that experience with others. I find this last point intriguing. The only thing that people need in order to increase church growth is to have an authentic encounter with Christ and to be willing to share that experience with others.

The disciples experienced Jesus in the boat, but they disappointed him and scattered from his side during the betrayal that happened in the garden. What they initially experienced, all of the miracles they witnessed, all of those amazing teaching moments to which they were a party, these didn't quell their fear or hold them steady in the garden. After Jesus' death and after Jesus' resurrection, after they returned to their fishing boats and Jesus had to call each of them from their boats again, only then did their experience of Jesus truly change their lives. So what I'm saying is that sometimes it's a series of encounters with Jesus before we get our life right. I'm also saying that in the series of encounters that we have with Jesus, some of these are going to be failures. We're gonna screw up and it's not going to be fun and it's not going to be pretty. But it is going to be useful. It's going to be useful to the kingdom of God. When it's useful to the kingdom of God, I kinda believe that it's going to be useful to the local church.

The last four months of 2009 were good months for me socially and professionally, but they were great months for me spiritually. It has been three years and a month since David moved out. It has been a little less than two and a half years since I was diagnosed with bipolar. These have not been easy years to be able to concentrate on spiritual things. Let me tell you, that really stinks if you're a pastor of a church and your job largely depends on the quality of your spiritual life. The work on the homeless persons' memorial service really moved me out of that place of struggle. It also moved me to a place of clarity. The place of clarity is: not only do people who are homeless need homes, but people of faith need the invigoration of their faith that emerges when we work faithfully with and for God's people. In short, we need to be in that boat with Jesus. We need opportunities to understand who Jesus is and what his grace offers us insofar as giving us meaning, not pleasure/ not privilege/ not a life without strife, but meaning and purpose insofar as the totality of our existence. We all have a God-shaped hole in our hearts. Christians understand that Christ fills that hole.

Dedicated Christians understand that that hole keeps morphing as we grow in faith and as we grow in maturity. We are not complete until our faith, like Peter, not only identifies Christ as the one who brings wholeness to our lives but that the experience of Christ always calls us to take the initial experience that happened in the boat into the larger experience of becoming fishermen to the world.

My theology professor in Divinity School decried armchair Christians who thought about their faith. Thinking about the faith and praying all of the prayers in the world about the faith doesn't fulfill the mandate of Christ to seek other people and meet their needs. Armchair Christians need to dust off their proverbial rod and reel, remember their initial experience of Jesus, and go fishing in the ponds, creeks, and oceans in this world. Then we come back, share our fish stories together, and go back to the waterways where the desperate and deserted and debilitated cluster so that once again our fishing poles and our fishing lines are cast doing the Master's work. Amen.