

Amateurs and rookies: Sunday, February 4 (Luke 5:1-11)

Sunday's Coming Premium

January 24, 2001

Most of us enjoy stories about naïve amateurs who make bizarre mistakes. We chuckle knowingly over the man who complained about the performance of his new powerboat, only to have the marina staff discover that he'd launched the boat without taking it off the trailer, or the woman who mistook the CD-ROM drive on her computer for a retractable cup holder. Such tales permit us to feel savvy and urbane by comparison.

The Galilean fishermen, hard at work on their nets, may have recalled stories like that when the teacher from Nazareth asked to use one of their boats as a podium. A bit later they had proof of his ignorance when he told them to cast their nets in the deep during broad daylight. Perhaps then folks joked, "Those that can, do; those that can't, teach."

Though the men never knew for sure if the huge catch of fish that resulted was a miracle of God or just dumb luck, it altered the course of their lives. Soon they became the amateurs and rookies. "Catching people," that's how Jesus described their new vocation. They had no training for this new line of work. Indeed, in his other volume, Luke described two of them, Peter and John, as "uneducated and ordinary men" (*agrammatoi* and *idiotai* in the Greek) even after their days under Jesus's tutelage.

The success of a movement that will turn the world upside down by means of a message, a "gospel," would seem to require orators and wordsmiths, not a bunch of *agrammatoi* and *idiotai* who respond first by trying to beg off on account of their uncircumcised and unclean lips. How shall this new thing grow?

The secret lies in the net with which Jesus's "fishers of people" will make their catch. It must be made partly of words. After all, the apostles and prophets did an awful lot of talking, and they left among their notes the principle that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Moreover, they came to believe that God

provided the words to say, and those words had remarkable power.

Nevertheless, how many people either then or now become followers of Christ solely through hearing or seeing words? Important as words are, the net that God hauls through this world, using former fishermen's hands, has other knots and strands as well.

Walter Wangerin Jr. touches on this truth about God's dragnet in his new book, *Paul: A Novel*. Here we meet a feisty, diminutive, quick-tempered Paul that few of us would gladly welcome in the seat next to us on a long airplane flight. Paul talks continuously. He works as quickly and cleverly with words as he does with the needles and canvas of his day job, but rarely, if ever, do we see him convince another person to share his trust in the crucified Christ through words alone.

Through stories about bit players in the canonical material from and about Paul, Wangerin describes how people get caught up in Paul's gospel. Among them we see Erastus, manager of the public markets in Corinth, and Apelles, a shoemaker who plies his trade in the markets where Paul sometimes works and where Erastus collects taxes. Neither Erastus nor Apelles has any patience with the prickly little tentmaker, and eventually situations arise in which each has reason to want to destroy Paul. Both times the apostle who'd had his own life hijacked while he was on a fire-breathing mission to halt the spread of the gospel responds by showing love to these enemies at precisely the moment when they are most unlovable to themselves as well as to Paul and his few associates.

Apelles has already split Paul's head open and now has drawn a knife to finish him off when Paul looks his attacker in the eyes and says, "Apelles, don't be afraid." A moment later he adds, "There's no reason for you to be afraid of me, Apelles. Because I love you."

This is plainly ridiculous, of course. Paul has no reason whatever to love Apelles, and no one understands that more clearly than Apelles himself. Nevertheless, with his anger stayed, Apelles puts away his knife and will soon become Paul's friend and a partner in sharing the gospel about Jesus—but not before he begins to see that the love of God, embodied in Paul's bizarre behavior and seemingly inappropriate words, means to claim him as God's own.

The net that caught Apelles and Erastus was made of words, all right, but the love of God and the spirit of Christ that wove the words together and gave them strength

proved the effective agents in this drama. That same net has hauled us, too, into the boat that Peter and the others learned to sail after that great catch in Galilee. Now our lives become part of the way God draws all humankind into the loving embrace that waits patiently while the boats work their way toward shore.

Here is a truth to cherish always: We don't mend, tend or haul the net; rather, by God's grace we *become* the net. God does the mending, the daily washing and the morning-by-morning encouragement and direction of would-be catchers who have fished all night and come home empty.

Finally, no night is completely lost that finds us washed up on shore, face to face with the Amateur who once borrowed Peter's boat to use as a pulpit, the one who has no day job, really, except to love us.