

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany: Luke 5:1-11

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When I was in seminary, I saw an old picture, one I hope I never forget. It's from just after World War II, in the interior of a bombed out German church. There's no ceiling, and the walls threaten to tumble at the slightest push of a gentle breeze. Five figures stand alone, no congregation filling the space behind them, a priest and a handful of servers robed and praying before the altar. Their vestments pop even in black and white, but the disarray of the war's aftermath hasn't shaken their straight and dedicated formation. Hands pitched in prayer, heads bowed, and there they stand, immortalized in their faithfulness.

If you google images of people gathering for prayer in the rubble of their sanctuaries, you'll find an overwhelming wealth of images. Of course, the World Wars leave us no shortage. That picture in Germany is just one of far too many, each inspiring and heartbreaking in their own right. A packed and crumbling Coventry Cathedral celebrating Mother's Day -- standing room only, partly because so many gathered there, but also because what remained of the pews hulked in a massive, broken heap along the stem wall borders. Similar black and white shots from Italy, France, Russia, and on and on fade into color, and Korea, Japan, and Alabama come into focus. Kodachrome gives way to iPhones, and Egypt and Syria, Indonesia and Israel, Nigeria and the Philippines join the dubious honor roll.

There are far too many images of the immediate aftermath, graphic things it sickens to see. We seem to pay more attention to those sickening images, though, than the ones that come a week later. The next sabbath, the day the remaining faithful gather again, brave and steady, defiant in the face of the world's cruelty. They come to wail and they come to weep. They watch exits nervously, but most importantly, they come to pray. They beg questions of God, demand answers, sit in stunned silence in their holy place made holy again after foul desecration. But they come. And they pray. And God sees them. It's just about the most mundane thing someone can do, going to church on a Sunday, but in the face of the worst this world has to offer, that mundane thing of going to church on Sunday takes on an air of heroism. And in spite of all the photographers showing up, we rarely see it.

That hidden heroism grabbed hold of my heart this past week, when I was doing something even more mundane. I showed up for work on the most mundane day of the week, Wednesday, sifted through old files, and spent hours of the day reading minutes and looking for old receipts. I stumbled on a banker's box with just a handful of items, sneezed away the dust settled on its contents, and dove in. I knew I wouldn't find the information I was looking for, but the history of the faithful called. See, in the bottom of that box was an old Service Register.

I don't know how many of y'all know this, but the church keeps records, sometimes meticulous records, of every service we do. I once answered a query of an amateur genealogist who was trying to track down an ancestor. He thought he'd triangulated his great-grandfather more or less to my neck of the woods, but he couldn't be sure. With a name and a date range, I found his baptism records and his funeral service. Regarding the latter, and thanks to those meticulous records kept by a long-since departed predecessor, I told the genealogist when the service took place, where to find the gravestone, what time the funeral was, how many people were in attendance, which priest did the funeral, and, though that day began with clear skies, a cold drizzle descended as the graveside service commenced.

This is what we priestly types do. You good people show up, we make sure posterity remembers your faithfulness. And that's exactly what happened Wednesday. I gingerly opened up that old service register, its binding worn away and taped back together, and found myself inspired by the faithful of St. Thomas' a hundred

years ago. This particular register opened with services in 1914 and ended in 1949, line after line of Sundays and weddings, funerals and baptisms, life moving forward as the world lurched on.

A few pages in, it hit me that I was looking at St. Thomas' as the world tore itself apart. As churches and cathedrals crumbled. As humanity bore the worst of itself and, more quietly, the best. This register spanned World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II. I flipped to Armistice Day. No mention of peace. I flipped to the end of the Roaring Twenties. No mention of failing stocks or dust in the air. I flipped to December 7, 1941. No mention of anything out of the ordinary. But of course there wasn't anything out of the ordinary that Sunday during their services. Infamy didn't hit Pearl Harbor until this part of the world finished lunch. In fact, in that entire service book, the descriptions of the days are pretty mundane. One Sunday was described, simply, as -- are you ready for this? -- "snowy." Another, chillingly, as "forty degrees below zero." In all that enviably beautiful penmanship, there's no mention of any of those major global events, save one.

Somewhere in the middle of 1918, months before the armistice, there's a single service of prayer. A memorial of sorts, a "Requiem for Our Fallen Heroes, RIP." On that same page, the only time in the 35 years covered in this register, on that same page, there's a single pressed flower. One mention of the world's cruelty in all those pages, one lonely flower staining one single page, both yellowed and faded and long bereft of the vibrant beauty they held in life. But there they were, beautiful in their silent witness nonetheless.

I know that single witness isn't a strike against the people of this place a hundred years gone. It was a notable moment for them, perhaps a single bright place in years of struggle. But in spite of the darkness they lived through, or in too many cases, did not live through, they came to this place. And they kept on coming. The faithful here in a church intact, praying for and maybe in the stead of those that couldn't elsewhere. I suppose what struck me so on that most mundane of Wednesdays, sneezing through old files and puttering around here, is how weighty those records felt. I know the events of the world filtered my perception, but the reality of the life of this church was much more quiet. The saints that came before us here, they kept coming. This was a pretty small church in a pretty small town. The faithful that gathered gathered with relatively few interruptions to their lives. And yet they came. The most mundane and the most heroic thing they could've done.

Mundane, at least by the world's standards, mundane is what the church is about. We don't all have our faith burnt into our lips like Isaiah. Frankly, that's a little too much excitement for someone like me. We don't all come to Christ through miracles like Peter or James or John. Truth be told, those men weren't showing up for the miraculous, either. They just came in to work and had a slow day. But the miraculous came to them. And we don't all become immortalized in our prayers through heart wrenching photography. Thank God. Thank God I haven't had to witness in the face of that level of destruction.

But that mundaneness doesn't make us any less Christian. It simply means we witness where we are, as we are, as best we can. There's something deeply powerful in the understatedly faithful. There's a witness that the highs and lows of this world -- the changes and chances of this life -- cannot shake. We pray for the world, alongside the world or in its stead. And still we come. We fight for justice and we call for peace. And still we come. We mourn, we laugh, we live. And still, we come.