

When I was a little girl, we didn't have a TV. The information I was given was that a) we couldn't afford one and b) we didn't need one anyway. However, that rationale could only last so long, and when my parents observed me going over to the neighbors' house to watch TV after school, they miraculously found the money and we got a set. My particular Saturday morning treat was to watch "Captain Kangaroo," and my particularly favorite part of "Captain Kangaroo" was the occasions when Mister Moose would trick him somehow and ping pong balls would rain from the ceiling. This was about the funniest thing I had ever seen, and I always hoped that today would be a day on which Mister Moose tricked Captain Kangaroo. I think, for you to fully appreciate the exquisite humor of this bit, I should show a typical incident.<sup>1</sup>

I sure you all instantly saw the parallels with today's reading. Captain Kangaroo is the expert. He's grown up, he has a deep voice, he wears clothes, he knows what's going on. Mister Moose is the trickster. He is a rank amateur, you can't see where he comes from, he acts like he knows something nobody else does, but it seems very unlikely because, you know, he's a moose. A puppet of a moose. And yet, when Captain Kangaroo gets sucked into his challenge, plays on his playing field, it turns out that Mister Moose did have a little something up his sleeve—an abundance, an overwhelming, ridiculous abundance of ping pong balls.

Simon Peter and his fishing partners, James and John, fished for a living. They were pretty much authorities on catching fish. When they came in to shore with empty nets after a long night of work, it would be reasonable to assume that

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xu53wu\\_captain-kangaroo-attack-of-the-ping-pong-balls-10-27-1976\\_shortfilms](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xu53wu_captain-kangaroo-attack-of-the-ping-pong-balls-10-27-1976_shortfilms)

the fish were simply not there. But along comes this rabbi with a background in carpentry, who appropriates a boat as a podium from which to teach, and he thinks the guys can catch some fish if they just let their nets down one more time. You can hear Simon's barely restrained sarcasm: "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet *if you say so*, I will let down the nets." Fine, they play along, and then before they know it they're hauling up nets so full of fish that the nets are breaking; they're filling other people's boats with fish and the boats are beginning to sink. Maybe Jesus didn't laugh in a gravelly, nasal way like Mister Moose, but I bet he was smiling a little bit while Simon et al. scrambled.

After that the parallel falls apart, and I won't force it. But I think it's important to look at this story as not only a miracle story and a call story, but also a trickster story, because the element of surprise is no accident. There is a miracle here, and a call to discipleship, and they come about as surprises because we don't usually think this way about our role in God's activity.

Peter does not ask to be allowed to follow Jesus because he's so impressed. He asks Jesus to please go away, because he's so impressed. "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Human beings cannot survive in the presence of great holiness; it's overwhelming. Think of Moses having to veil his face when he came down the mountain from talking with God, because his visage was so bright that the people couldn't look at him. Think of Isaiah's vision of God's court, when he cried, "I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, . . . yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Peter correctly surmises that he is not properly prepared to stand in the presence of someone with such power. It is in that moment of correct assessment of

his qualifications that Jesus enlists him to “catch people.”

Jesus calls these men not because they're such successful fishermen, let alone because they exhibit the gifts and graces for apostleship. Jesus calls them because they've seen that they can catch fish through him—that it's not the abilities that are determinative, but God's capacity to do remarkable things through ordinary people. If they know that about themselves, they'll know it's true about every person they meet: that person can participate in the redemption of the world that God is carrying out.

At the core of all the great religions is the insight that it's not about oneself. In one way or another, you learn to transcend or relinquish your ego. In Christianity, our metaphor is one of dying and rising—to live abundantly, you first have to die to your old self. We are not defined by our talents or our limitations; we are *in reality* part of something much greater than our characteristics or even our individual consciousness. On a very practical level, what that means is that we take Jesus' word for it that we can ourselves reveal God, even though we know that we often forget where we parked the car, that we get cross when we miss a meal, and that we sometimes make tasteless or insensitive jokes without realizing it.

I do see this as, among other things, a playful story. It's absolutely about sacred calling, but look how Jesus does it—with an obnoxiously large load of fish! I was listening to an interview with an author who's written a book about white-collar criminals, and when the interviewer asked him what someone like Ken Lay or Jeffrey Skilling or Bernie Madoff was thinking, he said that they were just always trying to solve problems, and they forgot about the real-life consequences of their

actions. It's like they took themselves too seriously; they couldn't say, "Oh, well, I guess this is an instance when we simply cannot win this round." Plus Tom and I have been watching "Suits," a legal drama about an attorney who always wins, and we've gotten to the part I knew had to happen, where he's having panic attacks because, guess what, you can't always win. Takes himself too seriously.

There is nothing more serious than filling out the kingdom of God on earth, but if you can't do it playfully, you're not doing it right.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus of fisher folk,

You taught your disciples to cast a wide net -- not for fish, but for people. Teach us the fishing craft. Make our fingers nimble so we may handle hearts and hands gently; make our minds quiet and patient while we wait for those who are not yet ready to receive you; and make our hearts merry, for the sake of the one who has captured our hearts already, Jesus Christ. Amen.

benediction:

Called to follow, called to care, called to serve, may we go from here ready to answer.

Called to act, called to listen, called to challenge, may we go from here ready to be sent.

With God's blessing, with Christ's calling, with the Spirit's leading, may we go in peace.