

Third Sunday After Epiphany (B/RCL)
Mark 1.14-20
January 25, 2009
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Who's worth saving?? When I was in my 20's and first working as a hospital chaplain, there weren't enough dialysis machines to go around. Hospitals had committees to decide which people applying for dialysis would be fortunate enough to receive it. I imagine the mother of four may have "beat out" a single person. Maybe – unless the single person was a brain surgeon? Maybe the young man in his twenty's would have leapfrogged ahead of the 80 year old on the list. Maybe – unless the 80 year old was a millionaire and a benefactor of the hospital? I don't know exactly how the decisions were made. I was too low on the totem pole to be invited to participate. 'Must have been a tough job, though, deciding who was "more" worth saving than somebody else.

Government officials are debating who's "more" worth saving when they discuss whether to invest tax dollars in prenatal care for poor pregnant women or research to cure cancer or prevent blindness or rehabilitation programs for inmates in prison or substance abuse treatment for addicts or feeding programs for the hungry or third world debt reduction or bank bailouts. There's never enough money to go around and our legislators are responsible for spreading limited funds as fairly, wisely, compassionately and efficiently as possible.

In the first lesson from the book of the prophet Jonah, it initially looks like **no one** in Nineveh is worth saving. God commands Jonah to tell the people of that great city that the clock is ticking. In 40 days the gig will be up and Nineveh will be destroyed. Now, in Scripture people often ignore, laugh at or kill the prophets. From the outside looking in, it sure seems like Jonah lucked out, since the people took his message to heart, repented of their sins and mended their ways. Faced with that humble response, God forgave the people of Nineveh and chose to spare their city. Those of you who remember what comes **next** in the story, though, know that

Jonah pouts when this happens. For some reason, Jonah had decided these people were not **worth** saving. We don't know if Jonah really thought they were all low lives, or that it looked bad for God to reverse Godself, or, more likely, that it was embarrassing to him and bad for his reputation, because he's the one who made the first gloom-and-doom announcement. He wanted to scream, "Stick with your original plan, God! Obliterate them all!"

Thankfully God didn't agree with Jonah then, and Jesus didn't agree later with those who would have drawn the circle of salvation very small in His own time. It drove the religious professionals crazy that Jesus didn't seem to want to exclude much of **anybody**, except the self-righteous who knew no need of a Savior. In this weekend's Gospel from St. Mark, Jesus believes that, for starters, two sets of fishermen are worthy to be saved, Simon Peter & Andrew, James & John. They weren't worthy to be **saved**, worthy to be **called** for any obvious reason we can see, even after we read **all** of St. Mark's Gospel. These four apostles are closest to Jesus, and even **they** don't perform well; they frustrate Jesus to no end with their inability or unwillingness to understand what He's trying to teach. More than once He asks, "What's **wrong** with you?? Have you been **listening** at all??"

Yet Jesus tells Simon & Andrew, James & John, that He will make them "fish for people," that they'll share His ministry of calling God's children to repentance and to belief in the good news about God's kingdom coming. He judges those fishermen worthy to do this in some way we can't fathom. He deems us worthy, too, worthy to be saved, worthy to be called into service sharing the good news with others.

I always mention Meister Eckhart when I preach on this Gospel text, because he's the one who said God catches us with the hook of love, and the more we wriggle on the other end of the line, the more permanently we become caught. When people complain that some churches have standards that are too lax, that those who are **not** worthy or who are **less** worthy are accepted into

the family of faith, they have not understood about that hook of divine love. They seem to think the Lord wants to chase people away rather than catch them. Untrue.

Truth be told, one of the reasons **I** love this community is that **you** have accepted **me**. A young man once told me I was sadly mistaken about God's call to ordained ministry, because St. Paul said women should be silent in worship, and my gender clearly disqualifies me from serving as a pastor. That's not what **you** said the first **and** the second time you issued me a call to serve among you. There are many places within the churches of the Reformation and outside it where people who are divorced and remarried are not welcomed to serve either. You accepted me in my brokenness, have helped me to heal, and have taught me by example what it means to forgive others' faults and be forgiven for our own. Holy Trinity is also a community in which men and women in recovery sit in these pews in worship and not just in folding chairs downstairs in 12 step meetings. We welcome single people and families of all sorts within our family of faith, including brothers and sisters who are gay. In recognizing the beauty and God-given worth in each other we honor the Father God who has made us, our Lord Jesus Christ who shed His blood "for **all** people for the forgiveness of sins", and the Holy Spirit who makes this diverse church holy.

Who is worthy to be saved? **None** of us on our own merits, and **all** of us by God's grace. The prayer I prayed as a child before receiving Holy Communion was this: "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed." "Lord, I am not worthy... but only say the word..."

Let us pray: Make us to worthy to be called by You, O Lord, and to call others to font, pulpit and Table. May the deeds and words of this family of faith draw the circle of salvation large enough to include all the children for whom You died.
Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham