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Mark 1:14-20
Year B, Epiphany III, 1/22/2005

For two summers in college, I was an annoyingly energetic camp counselor at the St. Crispin's Episcopal Conference Center in Eastern Oklahoma. Aside from living in a quaint cabin, life-guarding at a lethargic lake, and helping to clean commodes, I was assigned to welcome guests to the camp. Since my camp counselor compadres knew that I wanted to be a priest, it made sense for me to welcome visitors who were, surprise, surprise, mostly priests and deacons. In fact, almost every day, another priest or deacon would come to preach or celebrate the Eucharist in our outdoor chapel, down by the lake, or somewhere banal, like a cabin. It sounds lovely, but I have to say that you should bear in mind what types of priests or deacons were available for such events. One, these ministers had to reside or be in close proximity to the middle of nowhere.... Eastern Oklahoma. Two, they had to have available free time so that they could come and be with us. And three, these preachers had to be either brilliant enough or, more often, clueless enough to think that preaching to over 100 kids and 15 college students could be a beneficial or enriching spiritual enterprise for them or us. Most times, the kids just picked flowers, played with rocks, and looked up at passing birds and insects. Most times, counselors joined them.

On a warm Tuesday morning in late June, I was expected to meet a new visitor, Deacon Charles. He was scheduled to preach with the kids while another visiting priest would celebrate the Eucharist. Deacon Charles arrived looking thin, tired and haggard. I was doubtful and sure that he fell into the afore-mentioned "clueless" category. He was hunched over, leaning on a cane. His beard was long, white, and in disarray. One of the buttons on his shirt was missing, and the blackness of his clericals had faded into a hazy dark grey as black cotton will sometimes do. The few words we exchanged proved what I expected. The flora and fauna of the area would have the campers' undivided attention. Deacon Charles would not. As the liturgy began, I noticed, however, that Deacon Charles was clutching a prop, an old tape player, the really large kind with a flip out lid, and a retractable handle. It also had duct tape concealing its life-giving batteries. And after the Gospel reading, the same Gospel reading that we heard this morning about the calling of Simon Peter and Andrew to "fish for people," Deacon Charles took his old tape player, plopped it right down on the fair white linen spread over the altar and pushed play. I am certain that current altar guild members are gasping at the thought of dirty machinery on clean, crisp linen. But in this instance, it was the ancient machinery that gasped, gasped its last, The only thing we saw was the little stringy, magnetic, mylar tape hissing out of the flip out lid, first inches, then feet, then yards. A counselor came over and pushed stop as the unducky duct tape let go of the copper-topped batteries. The deacon looked down, looked down and confessed that he was usually not so good at remembering. That spewing tape was his lip-sync presentation homily. Deacon Charles' eyes filled with despair, and there was a long, empty silence. Then, he looked up to the heavens in silent prayer and brought his eyes back down to us. He cleared his throat, straightened up his body and began with a present tense, unrecorded voice.

He laughed and said, "I guess I really know what it's like to be Peter. The fact is, I'm not so good at a lot of the things that I do. I forget so easily. My efforts always seem to fall flat."... The kids and counselors did not know what to think of this unparalleled honesty, but picking

flowers was suddenly losing its appeal. He continued, "I don't know what to make of myself half the time, and I always feel like apologizing to my wife." He said, "Peter didn't get much right a lot of the time either." And then Deacon Charles looked back at that tape player and the spewing string as though it were his very soul, exposed and vulnerable and broken. He went over to it, grabbed it and ripped the tape out. I half expected him to pick up the recorder and run. But instead, he pulled and pulled and pulled in one long continuous effort, running back twenty feet or more, making the tape even worse. He took every bit of tape out of the cassette. He held the cartridge up in his hand, and instead of running away, he started to take that tape and surround us with it. He threw it over each and every one of us, carefully making sure that everyone was either encircled by it or touching it. And when everyone was inside his soulful streaming, he said that in his life he was also amazed that he would be allowed to serve as a Deacon, even though he seemed to have so many difficulties. He was thankful to be with us, even though everything he had to say had been erased from the tape and his mind. And he said, that's why Peter was so important to him, because Jesus still looked at him, this apostolic sad sap, and said, "I will make you fish for people," and "On this rock, I will build my Church." And with that, we looked at one another and realized that we had likewise been reeled in. None of us were looking at flowers or birds, and we all understood Peter and even Deacon Charles in a new way.

Hearing about the irony of Deacon Charles, creating a great sermon out of a broken tape player and heart is especially apt today, not only because both address the Disciple of Simon Peter, but because a holy sense of irony is a common theme, at least to me, in all of the readings for today and is what I would like to address. In the first reading from Jeremiah, we hear Jeremiah chastising the un-chaste Israelites about their closet paganism, yelling out, "Truly, the hills are a delusion, the orgies on the mountains." And although you have to love a prophet who uses a word like "orgies" Jeremiah is actually quite ironic in his ideals of God. He condemns the people who are attempting to placate the gods with their actions and sacrifices. But he is doing so by telling them to placate a different God with their actions and sacrifices, namely by groveling. This is ironic and hollow because it is the gods and not God who would require such self-flagellation, and yet Jeremiah, the prophet is calling for such actions for our God. He is supposed to be the prophet, but it is his vision of God that I have trouble with. Then, there is St. Paul who tells us that circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything, which sounds lovely until you realize that it is absolutely nonsensical. After all, if circumcision, which was thought to be a commandment of God, is nothing, does it follow that the commandments of God are nothing too? But Paul instead says that the commandments of God are everything. Are they nothing or everything? There is no logic. I have to say how pleased I was to find the readings this week dealing with circumcision and orgies, let alone the fact that they seem intent on leaving their readers double bound.

And then, there is Simon Peter himself. In today's Gospel reading from Mark, we hear Jesus calling out that the Kingdom of God has come near and that we should prepare ourselves and believe in the Good News. And we hear Jesus commission his first disciples: Simon Peter and Andrew. He says to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people," which I have to say also seems a bit ironic. If Jesus is talking about Good News and the Kingdom of God, why is he using a "net", a capturing device for prey, to describe how that new Kingdom of God will be spread. Is Jesus planning to take them to market or us? Ideally, not.

Indeed, there is a great deal of irony and incongruity in today's readings. The gods of orgies versus the God of shame, uncircumcision versus circumcision, and God taking us to market. And that does not even touch on the life of Simon Peter himself, who denied Jesus, misunderstood so much and yet was the cornerstone of the Church as we know it. Irony is a theme in our readings and a theme of our God, not because God likes to play tricks on us, like the gods of the orgies, or likes to confuse us. It is NOT that God is a barbed, biting beast in the sky waiting to tweak us with lightening bolts. Our God is ironic in the sense of being unexpected, and unexpected in the best sense of that word, like an un-birthday present. God is ironic because God builds a church with the efforts of the imperfect and the vulnerable, including Jesus' metaphor of a net, Paul, and Jeremiah. Our God is unexpected because God brings life out of death and forgiveness out of execution, and strength out of vulnerability, and acceptance out of the unacceptable.

Our God is unexpected like Deacon Charles' sermon was unexpected. And we all need to remember that, that our strength, our relationship with God likewise rests not in our achievements and successes. Those are lovely, wonderful parts of ourselves but God is also interested in, likes, and loves the weak, quiet recesses of our lives that we can sometimes guard more closely than the crown jewels. The kingdom of our world is often built upon an image of being unbreakable and ideal. Our ideals, thoughts, our bodies, our homes, our positions in life, and our national position in the world are supposed to be 925 sterling. But our God is not looking for a good Resume to bring forth the kingdom of God, or even a bad one to punish.

Our God is attracted to our vulnerabilities because if our God can show us that even our weaknesses can be redeemed and loved, then we have nothing to fear because all parts of ourselves, even the worst and humbling parts, can be instruments of and for the redemption of our God. And just like God used Peter, just like God used the other disciples, just like God spoke through Deacon Charles, God can use even our imperfections to bring forth the Good News of the Kingdom of our God. And ultimately, that is not ironic to our God, only to us, who ever thought that it could be any other way.