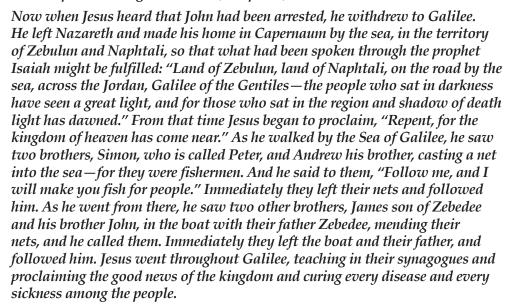
SUNDAY SERMON

Small Things with Great Love

The Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 4, verses 12 to 22.



Alphonsus Rodriguez was born in 1532 in Segovia, Spain. With the death of his father at age twelve, Alphonsus dropped out of school to take over the family business as a wool merchant. He married at twenty and had three children. When the plague swept through the land seven years later, his wife and all three children died of it. With the loss of so many lives came the loss of his business as well.

Broke and devastated, Alphonsus spent several years living alone on scraps, praying, asking God to show him what to do. One day, Alphonsus heard God tell him that God wanted him to be a priest, to be a Jesuit priest.

So he went and presented himself to the novice master. But the novice master rejected him. He was too old (at age 35); he didn't have a good enough education; and besides he was in lousy health.

Disappointed, he went away and prayed some more. Again God said, "I want you to be a priest." So Alphonsus thought, I can't do anything about my age, but I can go back to school and I can try to take care of my health. He did. Then he returned to the novice master and presented himself once more. A second time, he was told no.

So he prayed some more. Again God said, I want you to be a priest. What to do? This time, when Alphonsus went back to the Jesuits, he went straight to the top. Instead of the novice master, he presented himself to the Provincial. He told the Provincial all that had happened, and what God had told him. The Provincial thought, yes, I believe God wants you to be a priest.

But the Provincial sent him to the tiny island of Majorca—to a collegio, a high school. There he was put in the lowest place, as the porter at the gate, the one who answered the door, the one who was on the edge of the community, closest to the world. Everyone in the collegio knew he was in the lowest place and everyone in the town around knew he had been put in the lowest place.

Continued



DATE

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany Sun., Jan. 22, 2017

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

READINGS

Isaiah 9:1-4 Psalm 27:1, 5-13 I Corinthians 1:10-18 Matthew 4:12-23



St. Columba's is a welcoming Christian community that seeks to be open in spirit, deep in faith, rich in worship, active in service.

Day and night, Alphonsus had to deal with whoever showed up, asking for help or for handouts, often the riff-raff or the thieves. But Alphonsus threw himself into it, and a funny thing happened. People began to want to go visit the porter. Why? Because he listened to them; he was really interested and listened to whatever they had to say. He cared about people. People said he seemed to shine or glow—with love.

Long after he died, his journal was found, and what was written there revealed that Alphonsus Rodriguez was a divine mystic of the highest order, a holy man of God. Years later, when he was canonized, a saint of the church, it was for his ministry as a porter.

All day he sat at the gate–for 46 years–a door man. And when he heard a knock he always replied, "Coming Lord." For he knew–whether it was a bishop or a beggar–it was indeed the Lord God.

Often we think we need to do great things. I aspire to do great things. But as another saint, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, has said, "We can do no great things, only small things with great love." Alphonsus was a door man—a very small job in the eyes of the world, but he did that job with great love. And that made all the difference.

Here we find ourselves on the morning after; the morning after the inauguration, the morning after the protests. As our nation rotates in groans and leaps in its quadrennial spasm, transference of power, evoking cries ancient and new of elation and despair, of fears and hopes, of dreams realized and denied. We the people speak and it begins anew. Here, the emotional upheaval is palpable. We're drawn in to the whirlwind, determined and fierce at the onset. Soon battered by the acrimony from every party and platform, we retreat to the sidelines. Then lifted by hope, we rise again, to seek the light and a way forward. What a weekend it's been!

Coincidental I suppose—a blessing—that the Holy Scripture given to us this day traces the arc of a people who lived in darkness, and in that darkness lived with hope, and from that hope a light shone forth from God. But it was not the light they expected, it was not the messiah they had envisioned, and did not bring forth the new political economy of power they had imagined. No, it was far greater than anything they had foreseen, and they found themselves, even themselves—each of them, called, enrolled, baptized, agents, ambassadors of this new realm, disciples of God in Christ.

In a few swift verses, Matthew creates this entire arc. Here, at the outset of his ministry, Jesus goes from Nazareth to Galilee in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Isaiah had lived in a dark time, his people held captive in exile; Isaiah promised a future light from this darkness. Jesus, says the church, is that promised light, Mighty Counselor, Prince of Peace. And Jesus, setting out to be the light of the world, turns and ... what? Calls ... a couple of fishermen.

It's as if the Messiah showed up here today and said "I have come as a light to fulfill the hopes and expectations of all the years, to bring world peace." Then said, "the fulfillment begins with you so, come, follow me."

Walking along the shore, by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus called his first disciples. Two pairs of brothers: Simon-called Peter-and Andrew; and James and John-the sons of Zebedee. Each was a fisherman-mending and casting nets, tending boats. Jesus said, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets-and, in the case of James and John, they left their father too-and followed Jesus.

They were fishermen. They caught fish. That's what they did; that's who they were. Jesus said, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

'You'll still be fishermen. You'll still be who you are and you'll still do what you do, but different. I call you as you are and will redirect your path, your intention, your passion, your resources, your livelihood. I invite you toward a different end.'

What if, instead of fishermen, Jesus had seen ... nurses tending the sick? "Follow me," he might have said, "that you may tend not only the bodies but also the souls of those who ail." Or if, instead of fishermen, Jesus had seen ... cooks preparing a meal? "Follow me," he might have said, "that you may satisfy not only the appetites, but also the hearts of those who hunger." Or teachers—that you may kindle the fires of the Spirit and teach the ways of God. Or mechanics, or lawyers, or students. Follow me. You'll still be who you are and you'll still do what you do, but different. For now I am with you; we are bearers of light, realizing the commonwealth of God.

What is it that you do? And how is it different as you are following Jesus? Jesus does not say, stop being a fisherman, stop being a teacher, or a lawyer, or a nurse. Later in his ministry, Jesus does not tell the tax collector to stop collecting taxes, nor the soldier to stop soldiering. But if we're doing what we do and are at the same time doing it as a way of following Jesus, then do we need to do it different? With love, for justice; with clarity, for peace; with forgiveness, generosity, and gratitude; determined to stand with the oppressed and those in greatest need.

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And if Jesus were walking along the Sea of Galilee and he came to you–being who you are, doing what you do—and Jesus said to you, "Follow me, and I will make you ... what?" What's the answer to that question? What is your answer, your calling? What is the invitation and next step for you in the Way of Christ, in our world today?

For you, my friends, by the loving grace of God and the power of the Spirit... you are bearers of the light. It is our time, to take our place in the arc of justice. You and I, with the disciples and saints who have gone before uswith Peter, Andrew, James and John, with Alphonsus Rogriguez and Mother Teresa, 'We may do no great things; surely, we may do small things with great love."

Please find a copy of the Book of Common Prayer, turn to page 832. I invite you to join me in prayer—"A Prayer of Self-Dedication", at the bottom of page 832. Be careful. This prayer is not for the faint of heart.

"Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray you, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people, through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen."