Sermon for January 26, 2020  
Pastor Martha Bardwell  
Matthew 4:12-23  
Time after Epiphany  
Baptism of Eli August

Last Monday was Martin Luther King Jr. Day. I love MLK day and I really feel that the time is always right to celebrate and listen to this American prophet – we always have so much to learn from his witness and writings. And – at the same time – I can’t help but notice that what sometimes happens on MLK day is this: we lift him up on a pedestal as a hero who somehow single-handedly led the civil rights movement, and in the process, we tend to forget all of the other people who were part of the movement in his time.

On Monday I came across a story about one such often overlooked person, a woman named Georgia Gilmore. She was a midwife, an activist, and a cook. As a cook, she helped to create an alternative economy that sustained the black community during the Montgomery bus boycott.

You see, during the Montgomery bus boycott, which started after Rosa Parks was arrested and lasted for 381 days, black people refused to ride the segregated city buses until the laws were changed, and so during that whole year, the black community needed other ways to get around. They had to organize cars, cabs, trucks and wagons to get people to and from their jobs.

So to fund this alternative transportation system, Gilmore brought together a crew of black women to cook and sell food – they made pound cakes, sweet potato pies, fried fish, stewed greens, pork chops – and they sold the food in churches, in beauty salons, at cab stands. And Gilmore organized this in such a way that made it seem to the white establishment and employers like nothing subversive was going on – just some women, selling some food. But secretly, these women donated the money they raised to pay for the insurance, gas, wagons, and repairs that were needed during the boycott.

Gilmore called this group of women who worked with her, “The Club from Nowhere,” because it seemed to people like the money to fund this alternative transportation system was coming from nowhere.

The Club from Nowhere. As we consider the gospel lesson for this Sunday it seems to me that this could serve as a name as well for the crew of disciples that Jesus calls to follow him. The Club from Nowhere. Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John – their names may be familiar to us now, but they were just simple fishermen casting their nets along the sea of Galilee. They were nobodies from nowhere – eking out a living, surviving as they could, carrying on the family business - when Jesus calls them to follow him, right in the wake of John’s arrest.

Isn’t it astounding, how suddenly these men seem to drop their nets and follow Jesus? It’s so immediate, isn’t it? It seems so unrealistic and unbelievable that these men could be mobilized for the dominion of heaven so quickly. But then again – have you ever fallen in love? With a

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1 I found her story here: https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2018/01/15/577675950/meet-the-fearless-cook-who-secretly-fed-and-funded-the-civil-rights-movement?fbclid=IwAR1uhuDQy9ZsIO41dDY39upEYcTUXF0s1ell-HHfCcXvOQtwTIB3mVyOLc
romantic partner, or with a newborn baby, or with a dog? Or – maybe like these women in the Club from Nowhere – have you ever fallen in love with the quest for dignity, with the image of God in yourself and in other people that the world has denied? Have you ever fallen in love and experienced a flood of light and love and grace and truth come into your life that you didn’t think was possible? I imagine that this call moment was a falling in love moment for the disciples. I imagine that the light and love and grace and truth of God was so compelling in Jesus that they couldn’t help but follow him and they didn’t waste time worrying about what they left behind on that shore because they knew that they were heading into the great adventure of their lives, an adventure they were created for.

Every time I hear this story of the calling of the disciples I always get a hymn stuck in my head, and it’s the hymn we are going to sing soon for the Hymn of the Day, “You have come down to the lakeshore.” The images from this hymn have forever formed my imagination and the way I picture this day on the lakeshore. And I learned this week that it’s a song that is special to the Troutman Blumenshine family, a song that they treasured and would sing in Spanish together when they lived in Nicaragua. It’s a song that imagines the gospel scene as a falling in love moment, as the beginning of a great adventure, and the tune has the quality of a lullaby. (It would make a great lullaby for Eli!). In the refrain we will sing:

“Sweet Lord, you have looked into my eyes, kindly smiling, you’ve called out my name. On the sands I have abandoned my small boat, now with you I will seek other seas.”

Now notice – that as we sing this hymn, we sing it as if WE are the ones on the lakeshore that day – as if WE are the ones being called – and we are, of course! Each one of us is called to follow Jesus. Just as we named Eli today at the lakeshore of Chicago Avenue – at our baptismal font, as one who is sealed with Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever – so each one of us is called in baptism to follow Jesus as God’s beloved child. I saw the loving gaze of Jesus among us, and didn’t you see it, too - as Eli was surrounded by our smiling faces, and as Pastor Laurie looked into his eyes and called out his name as Eli August, child of God. He is caught in the net of God’s love and that net will never let him go.

This loving gaze rests especially on Eli today, but also on all of us who have also been called by Jesus. It’s a loving gaze that calls us to follow and in the course of following, we abandon our small boats on the sand. For when Jesus came that day to call Simon Peter, and Andrew, and James and John, he called out their names, and he said, with his presence if not with words – “Beloved, come with me - that boat is too small for you.”

As we are renewed in discipleship this morning, we may well ask ourselves – what boats do we find ourselves in, that are too small for us, that God is calling us to leave behind? A boat of self-centeredness – of just living for yourself and your family? A boat of comfort? Of being at ease with your white privilege? A boat of fear? A boat of shame? A boat of success by the world’s standards? Those boats are too small. Leave them on the shore today, friends! Jesus calls out to us– “Repent, for the dominion of heaven has come near! Follow me, beloved,” he says!
Now I don’t mean to plant grandiose ideas in your head about abandoning life as it is. Sometimes leaving a small boat behind means digging in deeper to the place right where we are – loving our neighbors, and ourselves, and creation, in deeper, more faithful ways.

I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and martyr. There was a moment in his life when he heard the call to leave his small boat behind. It was 1939, and he had just come to America to study and work in safety, far from Hitler’s regime. He could have stayed in America during the war, writing books, teaching, living a comfortable scholar’s life. But in his prayers to God he recognized that he needed to go back to his home country, to Germany, right into those tumultuous waters…and he knew he was leaving his small boat of security and self-preservation behind. He went back to Germany and as we know, his work in the resistance cost him his life.

I think of a story that LaVonne shared with us in her Sentinel article about the Wednesday neighborhood quilting group that she leads here at Our Saviour’s. She wrote about how she had witnessed a Somali woman talking at length with an Ethiopian woman as they sewed. LaVonne asked if they had similar languages and the Somali woman replied, "Oh no, they are very different. I learned the Ethiopian language so I can talk to my neighbors."

That Somali woman stepped out of her boat, her language, to connect with her neighbors on their terms so she could build relationships of trust and love.

How might we step out of our small boats today and leave them behind in the sand? How might we, like the Club from Nowhere, be drawn into the alternative economy of God’s grace and love and truth, which always challenges the powers of this world that seek to divide and dominate us?

As we sing together, may we imagine Jesus giving each of us that loving look, issuing that loving call, reaching out to each one of us, right where we are, just as we are, and calling us into the grand adventure of following him. For truly, the dominion of heaven is at hand. Amen.