

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from February 7, 2010

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“What Does It Take?”

Scriptures:

Isaiah 6:1-8

Luke 5:1-11



As far as I can tell, none of our favorite local football teams are in the Super Bowl this year. No Patriots, no Jets, no Giants. Tonight the match-up in Super Bowl XLIV (44) is between the Indianapolis Colts and the New Orleans Saints. I don't know about you, but I'm not very invested in the outcome; in fact, I'm so removed from football, I still have to remind myself every year that the Colts don't come from Baltimore anymore. Although, it would be nice for the Saints to win for emotional reasons. Even though the predictors assure us that Super Bowl XLIV will yield a pretty good game, my guess is that this year many of us will turn it on simply to watch those commercials.

Advertisements during the Super Bowl are usually the cleverest, most entertaining, funniest, most innovative of all television advertising and they cost millions of dollars per minute to air. It's worth the exorbitant price to the advertisers, though, because many, many millions of people—this year, an estimated 100 million—will see the commercial and remember the product. The goal, of course, is to get the viewers to change their consumption behavior in favor of the product advertised. To leave one brand to follow its competitor.

Over the last several decades, the folks wanting to improve the public's health in a variety of realms have taken to television advertising, too, though not necessarily aired during prime time. These public health television ads join a host of other awareness strategies to get people to change their behavior: to wear seat belts, to exercise more, to get prenatal care. A classic example of this is the public health effort targeted at cigarette smoking. Since the issuance of the Surgeon General's report in 1964, we've seen all kinds of strategies to encourage behavior change. At the very beginning we saw warning labels appear on packages, then increased state and federal taxes on tobacco, public education campaigns aimed at children, the removal of billboard, magazine and TV advertising *for* cigarettes replaced by advertising to give them up. Yet with all those strategies—gimmicky TV ads, increased costs, scary pictures of black lungs—studies found that the most effective message was when your own doctor looked you in the eye and told you to quit. Then it was up close and personal, difficult to ignore.

Jesus' invitation to his first disciples to follow him appears in all four gospels. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus is walking along the Sea of Galilee and sees Simon and his brother An-

drew casting their nets and simply says, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they drop everything and follow. Then he goes a little farther and sees James and John sons of Zebedee, mending their nets and calls them and they immediately follow. Almost exactly the same account is in the gospel of Matthew. In the gospel of John, it's John the Baptist who points him out: There he is! The Lamb of God! The one I've been telling you about! And the first disciples follow Jesus to where he is staying. But in this morning's reading, the account from the gospel of Luke, Jesus performs a full-blown miracle before issuing the call: so many fish that the nets were breaking and the boats were sinking. In our first reading we hear the prophet Isaiah tell his call story and it's pretty fantastic, too: the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, with the hem of his robe filling the temple, and six-winged flying creatures and shaking pivots and lots of smoke. It's enough to make you fall to the ground.

Both Isaiah and Simon, soon-to-be-called Peter, are so bowled over by what they witness that their realization of who and what they're facing causes spontaneous, fear-filled confession. Isaiah blurts out, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips." Simon Peter falls down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

And you gotta wonder, with all we know already, what does it take for us? In Luke's gospel, before the call story we read this morning, Jesus had already been preaching and teaching with authority to astounded crowds, casting out demons, laying hands on all those who were sick and curing them. He even rebuked the fever of Simon's mother-in-law in Simon's own house.

But even after all these, all these strategies, if you will, raising awareness of who Jesus is and to encourage people to change their behavior and follow him, on this morning on the Lake of Gennesaret, [another name for the Sea of Galilee], Jesus instructs Peter to put out into the deep water for a catch, and Peter initially resists. "We've been out there all night and caught nothing, but OK if you say so." And we can imagine this seasoned fisherman looking sideways at the carpenter from Nazareth, Nazareth situated 16 miles inland.

Peter had already heard him teach and preach and had witnessed his healings and the exorcised demons shouting at Jesus, "We know who you are! You are the Son of God!" Yet it took a miracle. It took Jesus' directly speaking to Peter for him to finally absorb it and leave everything to follow him.

What does it take for us? Jesus has been calling us since before our Baptisms, calling us into the Body of Christ, calling us to discipleship, to follow him, to leave those things which distract us, which keep us from a full surrendering to his way.

Over the last several weeks we've talked about our own procrastination and separation from each other and the winter blahs and our tendency to ignore, to put off, to give in to inertia, despite knowing better. Yet Jesus has not stopped calling.

We know the costs of not taking care of our bodies. Even though we don't fall to the floor in a confessional state, we know the range of shame we feel when the dentist can tell we haven't been flossing every day or when we stand on the doctor's scale and we know it's more

accurate than our own.

But what about our souls? Our spirits? Our hearts? Do we need a miracle for us to finally turn away from the things, the situations, the addictive behaviors, the addictive relationships which keep us from living in a deep way with our God? What is it that we keep doing even though we know better? Staying too busy for devotion to God? Too critical of God's people? Too apathetic?

My Dad was one of those folks who began smoking as a kid in the 1930s and kept at it for nearly 60 years amidst the revelation of new research and the call of advertisements and warnings, until one day his doctor looked in his throat and then looked him in the eye and told him he had to quit. He quit that day and never smoked again. He left his pack-a-day and followed a new path toward health.

And we noticed as the weeks and months went by how his color became a little pinker, his step a little springier, his smile a little brighter. It was like a miracle had occurred. Make no mistake, it was hard work, but the reward was worth it.

Very few people report getting a direct tap on the shoulder by Jesus. Yet all of us have been made aware through a variety of ways for a variety of years of his saving grace and his call to us. We have read and we have prayed. We have served and we have listened. We have witnessed his love through the loving actions of his people. Are we waiting for a miracle?

Lent will begin 10 days from now and we will be given the opportunity once again to reflect and re-examine how Jesus is calling us. As we discern and discover the areas in our lives that need changing, as we lay down and leave our favorite brands of negative actions and influences to follow their direct competitor, Jesus Christ, we, too, will notice that it's hard work, but with God's grace, our hearts will open, our spirits will soar, and our love will grow. And then we will notice that Jesus is closer and that he seems to be talking directly to us. And that's the miracle. Amen.

