

My family sometimes gives me some strange gifts. They often end up in my office.

Case in point. My brother gave me this "bobble-head" Jesus. At first I thought it was somewhat sacrilegious. But in looking at the box, it seems that whoever manufactured this was seriously intending to market it to Christians. It shows the Nativity, the Crucifixion and the Ascension. It has a printed copy of the "Footprints" story. And it says, "Jesus saves." Though it does carry the strange warning that Jesus is "not intended for children under 5 years of age." Still, a rather strange gift.

I also have a gift from my mother. It's this little model of a Galilean fishing boat, along with a little fisherman. But the fisherman is really big compared to this boat. He's out of scale. And the boat itself is not very accurate. Long wooden planks go from bow to stern. In fact, I counted. This model shows 18 long planks that make up this boat. But that's not accurate. Galilean boats weren't built that way.

Twenty-one years ago I actually saw one of these boats. I was on my one and only pilgrimage to the Holy Land. And by the shores of the Sea of Galilee in Nof Ginosaur, we saw the 1st Century Galilean fishing boat that had been discovered a few years earlier. We had to look at it while it was in a tank of water, because at the time the restoration process hadn't been completed. It's now restored and on display in a museum. And it is a marvelous thing to behold.

It was an amazing archeological find. A fishing boat, dating back to the time of Jesus. Astonishing.

And on the wall was a diagram showing each piece of wood in this 1st century boat. This boat wasn't made up of 18 long planks. It was made of hundreds of smaller pieces. A five-foot plank over here, a three-foot plank there, a one-foot plank over there. It was a boat made of pieces-parts. It certainly wasn't uniform like this model.

In fact, the real Galilean fishing boat contained 7 different kinds of wood from 7 different species of trees. And there were even some pieces that apparently had been salvaged from earlier boats. A real mish mash. After all, natural lumber can be as scarce in Galilee as it is on the plains of northwest Texas. You took what you could get, and made use of every scrap you could find.

But in this boat, all of these many odd pieces had been gathered together by a skilled craftsman. He put them all together with mortise and tenon joints and wood pegs. Very labor intensive. To hand tool all of those hundreds of planks. And to fashion them together to form a watertight boat.

Such a boat would represent a substantial investment for a first century Galilean fisherman. And yet, as we heard in our Gospel lesson, four of Jesus' followers gave up such a boat. Andrew, and his brother Simon, and their partners James and John, left such an investment behind.

They left behind THE major asset of the Bar Jonah & Bar Zebedee Brothers Fishing Consortium, Incorporated. They dropped their nets and stepped away from their expensive boat. And they followed the call of the itinerant rabbi who told them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

The natural question is, "Why?" Why would they do such a thing? From a worldly standpoint it doesn't seem to make much sense. Why abandon your home and your livelihood? The Gospels don't tell us why. Matthew simply says that Peter, Andrew, James and John left their boats and nets, and immediately followed. If we bring the Gospel of John into the picture, we see that Jesus might have had a previous relationship with some of them. We had that Gospel lesson last week.

But even so. To drop your nets. To walk away from your boat. To drop everything and leave your life behind.

Why?

These 4 obviously weren't chasing money. If they wanted money, they would have stuck with the nets and boats.

They weren't chasing success. By following Jesus, James was beheaded, and Peter and Andrew ended up being crucified. And John was either executed or spent his last years in exile. Not much of a recruiting poster. As far as the world is concerned, those are not good reasons to give up your boat and your nets.

Yet, Jesus knew something that the world does not know. And apparently, these 4 fishermen caught just a whiff of what Jesus knew. They caught just a tiny glimpse of Jesus' vision. Jesus said, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

They were still going to be fishermen. But their fishing would take on a whole new meaning. Instead of just catching fish for money, they would be casting their nets trying to bring people in, trying to bring people closer to God. Not the most lucrative enterprise in terms of money. But the most important thing any of us can do. To help bring people into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

And what Peter, Andrew, James and John did not know is that they would be leaving one kind of boat for another. Jesus the master carpenter was going to take them, and he was going to form and fashion them into a new kind of boat. He was going to fashion them into his church.

It was a strange gift Jesus gave them. He gave them a vision of fishing for people. And he fashioned them into a group to do just that.

Jesus used a strange assortment of disciples. He had folks from many walks of life. He had disciples with very different politics. One of his disciples had been part of the revolutionary party that wanted to violently overthrow the Roman government. He had another

who used to work for the Roman government. Jesus took all of their pieces-parts. The disciples certainly weren't uniform. And they required some work, some shaping, some finishing. But Jesus called them together. He took their rough edges, and he worked on them. And he formed them into his church. And he had them sail forth, propelled by the wind of his spirit, to fish for people.

Of course, we're no different. We have our little "boat" here at St. Paul's. We're made up of a variety of folks. We have folks who root for various sports teams. We have folks with differing interests and gifts. We have folks with very different political views. Yet God has called each of us to be here. And God is in the process of working on us. Not just for our own benefit. But also for the benefit of others. God has a purpose in mind for us. After all, the object of cutting a piece of lumber into a 2x4 is not to have a 2x4. "Wow, what a wonderful 2x4." No, no, no. A 2x4 is useful only when it is used to build something else.

We are only useful when we are engaged in God's work in the world. God has called us together. He is shaping and molding us. And he asks us to catch just a glimpse of his vision for us.

I believe we have a wonderful glimpse in our vision statement:

***Worshipping God in the beauty of holiness.
Welcoming and growing in faith and fellowship.
Serving our neighbors in Jesus' name.***

I love this statement. It describes things we do well and things we're seeking to do better. It describes who we are and who we believe God is calling us to be.

It's a strange gift God has given us. This place. This group of people. But here we are. God has brought us here. God has called me to be here. God has called you to be here. God has given us a job to do.

And God is calling us to grow as his people.

There's an old prayer which I love.

"O Jesus of Nazareth, Master Carpenter, who on the Cross with wood and nails has wrought our full salvation; wield well your tools in these the workshops of our souls, that we, who come to you rough-hewn, may be fashioned into a truer beauty by your hand; for your name and glory's sake."

I love that images in that prayer.

Jesus the carpenter, Jesus our master builder.

Wielding his tools, working with us and in us, building us, fashioning us.

Taking those places that are rough-hewn and smoothing them into a "truer beauty."

It's a wonderful image for us as individuals. We need Jesus to smooth out our rough edges, to bring out a greater beauty in our lives. We need God to form and fashion us so that we are more like Jesus.

And it's a wonderful image for the church. There are no perfect Christians. Each of us has flaws. And yet, God works with us. As the saying goes, God can write straight on crooked lines. God can take us, in spite of our shortcomings, and make us into the Body of Christ.

We're not like this idealized Galilean fishing boat. We're like the real thing. Lots of different pieces of wood, lots of different kinds of wood.

And yet a skilled builder can fashion us into something beautiful and something useful.

May we be open to our master's shaping.

O Jesus of Nazareth, Master Carpenter, who on the Cross with wood and nails has wrought our full salvation, wield well your tools in these the workshops of our souls, that we, who come to you rough-hewn, may be fashioned into a truer beauty by your hand; for your name and glory's sake.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.