

EPIPHANY V

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.' Luke 5:8

Perhaps some of you read, as I did, this front-page article in the **New York Times** on Tuesday. Headlined, **Flock Is Now a Fight Team in Some Ministries**, It begins

MEMPHIS — In the back room of a theater on Beale Street, John Renken, 42, a pastor, recently led a group of young men in prayer.

“Father, we thank you for tonight,” he said. “We pray that we will be a representation of you.”

An hour later, a member of his flock who had bowed his head was now unleashing a torrent of blows on an opponent, and Mr. Renken was offering guidance that was not exactly prayerful.

“Hard punches!” he shouted from the sidelines of a martial arts event called Cage Assault. “Finish the fight! To the head! To the head!”

The young man was a member of a fight team at Xtreme Ministries, a small church near Nashville that doubles as a mixed martial arts academy. Mr. Renken, who founded the church and academy, doubles as the team's coach. The school's motto is “Where Feet, Fist and Faith Collide.”

And goes on

Mr. Renken's ministry is one of a small but growing number of evangelical churches that have embraced mixed martial arts — a sport with a reputation for violence and blood that combines kickboxing, wrestling and other fighting styles — to reach and convert young men, whose church attendance has been persistently low. Mixed martial arts events have drawn millions of television viewers, and one was the top pay-per-view event in 2009.

Recruitment efforts at the churches, which are predominantly white, involve fight night television viewing parties and lecture series that use ultimate fighting to explain how Christ fought for what he believed in. Other ministers go further, hosting or participating in live events.

The goal, these pastors say, is to inject some machismo into their ministries — and into the image of Jesus — in the hope of making Christianity more appealing. “Compassion and love — we agree with all that stuff, too,” said Brandon Beals, 37, the lead pastor at Canyon Creek Church outside of Seattle. “But what led me to find Christ was that Jesus was a fighter.”

The outreach is part of a larger and more longstanding effort on the part of some ministers who fear that their churches have become too feminized, promoting kindness and compassion at the expense of strength and responsibility.

Now, as most of you know, I don't flinch from a good fight when I see the need.

Also, that the Jesus I love is not a wimp. But I would have to say that on the spectrum of “Christian “ theologies, if this is at one end, we at St. John’s are probably quite near to the other. And I have to wonder what Jesus had anything like this in mind when he summoned Simon Peter and the others that day at Gennesaret. Well, I guess I know what I think... If he had a grave, he’d be rolling over in it.

One of my favorite icons is a picture of the scene at the lake. I talked about it in a sermon some years ago; I keep it right by my computer desk and gaze into its deep blue when I’m contemplating what to write next. Jesus is in the boat with four guys, two of whom are holding a net full of fish, and one is Peter on his knees with his hands outstretched to Jesus, who’s standing up, wearing a giant halo, in case we were in doubt about who’s who. Another boat is right behind, with one boy in it. There’s a crowd on the shore watching, including a miniature boy reaching out for a big fish, some other fish who appear to be flying above the boat, a starfish with too many legs, and, interestingly, a bunch of snow-capped mountains in the background.

It’s a far cry from the shaven-headed, tattooed, extreme fighters pictured in the NYT, but I have to say, this icon feels more familiar, and somehow more real, to me than those news photos.

Today, all three of our Scripture readings speak with a single voice. - though I have to confess I tweaked the Hebrew Scripture in this case. In one of the most resounding passages of all Scripture, Isaiah has had a vision of God, and been struck by his own unworthiness, but God commands him to preach and he obeys. Paul sees the risen Christ, realizes he is unfit to be called an apostle because of his history of persecuting the church. But by God’s grace he becomes the giant of early Christianity. And in the Gospel, Simon Peter gets a glimpse of Jesus’ power, falls on his knees in profound awareness of his own sinfulness, but nonetheless is called by Jesus to be a fisher of people.

I believe we should find comfort in all these stories. Here we have three great heroes of salvation history: Isaiah, Peter, and Paul. And what’s their common reaction to hearing a call from God? That they are unworthy. Isaiah cries,

Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

Paul says, *For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle.*

And Peter's response: *Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.*

I have no doubt that these are authentic responses. They have the ring of psychological and emotional truth, even if they aren't verbatim accounts of what Isaiah and Peter actually said – Paul is writing his own self-assessment. And they reflect feelings with which I am all too familiar (*I am not worthy, I am not good enough, God*). And I hear those feelings echoed by almost everyone I speak to with whom I do discernment and mentoring work – and that includes many of you as you explore your call to ministry here at St. John's and beyond. Serve on the vestry? *Who, me?* Act as a warden? *You've got to be kidding!*

But for most of us, most of the time, I believe there's another reaction lurking beneath our sense of unworthiness, or perhaps in fact *contributing* to our sense of unworthiness. And that's the reaction one of my friends once characterized as, *Here am I, Lord. Send someone else!*

Because the truth is, doing God's work is *work*. It's hard work. It's not always fun, and it's rarely sexy. It will not burnish our resumes or add to our IRAs. Doing God's work can be slow, frustrating, perplexing, tedious, and sometimes even dangerous. (But, one hopes, for most of us not dangerous in the way that Ultimate Fighting can be dangerous.) The **Times** article concludes

But on that cold night in Memphis, Mr. Renken, the pastor from Xtreme Ministries, watched as two of his three fighters were beaten, one emerging with a broken ankle.

Another, Jesse Johnson, 20, a potential convert, was subdued in a chokehold and decided not to return home with the other church members after his bout. He stayed in Memphis, drinking and carousing with friends along Beale Street, this city's raucous, neon-lighted strip of bars.

Doing God's work, becoming fishers of people, is mostly dangerous to our settledness, to our sense of control and certainty, as we are called beyond our comfort zone

to witness to and act on our faith. I know what a struggle it has been for so many of you just to walk into a church, let alone to commit yourselves to our life together in community with its ever deepening implications and demands. But you've done it, or you're doing it, and in that, my dear friends, you are in the company of the greats: Isaiah, Peter, and Paul, and the legions of saints throughout the millennia who have heard God calling, felt unworthy, and nonetheless, became good and faithful servants.

The great hymn we just sang speaks of the disciples' fates: dying homeless, being crucified upside down. These dire ends are unlikely to be ours. But the hymn speaks, as well, of hearts *filled brimful, and broken, too*. And that's much more likely to happen to us as we heed God's call.

George Hebert has a poem that begins

A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant rears,
Made of a heart, and cemented with tears:

One more disciple who felt as all worthy disciples feel: unworthy, but somehow, nonetheless, called and ready to obey. And to that let us all say: *Alleluia!*

Amen.

