

Some years ago, I visited the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, the Trappist monastery where the renowned twentieth century monk and author, Thomas Merton, had been in residence. While I was there, I happened upon a video that featured several of the monks discussing their observations about monastic life. One of them recalled that shortly after he was admitted to the monastery, he met with the Abbot and the Novice Master. They asked him which of the many jobs around the monastery at which the monks worked to sustain the community he might be interested in. The monk recalled, "I told them I'd happily work at any job they assigned me. Except one. I said I simply detested cheese. I couldn't stand the sight of it, the smell of it, the taste of it, even the texture of it. And I wasn't too fond of cows, either, or of dairy products in general. So I said I'd be happy with anything else." (The monastery produced cheese for its own consumption and sold the surplus commercially.) The monk paused for a moment, then continued. "And now I've been the cheese master here at Gethsemani for over thirty years."

Welcome to monastic life and your first lesson in the practice of faith. Faith has little to do with where we want to go; it's about going where we're called to be. And our baptismal callings won't necessarily unfold as we'd envisioned or hoped; instead, we'll often have to give up our preconceptions and preferences, and rest in the faith that the Lord is calling us to the work He's laid out for us.

As Peter learned in today's Gospel.

A little background helps to shed some light on the incident Luke related to us. When we think of the Galilee region and the town of Capernaum at the center of Jesus' public ministry, we tend to envision the region as a rusticated outpost of largely impoverished people. While that may have been true of outlying settlements, it certainly wasn't the case overall. Archeological evidence indicates, for example, that Capernaum, Jesus' home base, was a prosperous town by the standards of the day, and the Galilee region as a whole was a significantly more vibrant region, economically, than was once supposed. A major Greco-Roman city, Sepphoris, was just four miles from Nazareth, an easy walk in Jesus' time, a

commercial center where one made one's way through "colonnaded streets and large buildings," perhaps on one's way to the city's large amphitheater.<sup>1</sup> Given the city's ongoing construction projects, it's likely that Jesus, perhaps along with Joseph, often plied their trade in Sepphoris.

And Sepphoris wasn't the only prosperous site in the Galilee. Along with the city of Tiberius (still a major city in Israel), Capernaum was doing pretty well for itself, too. Today, Capernaum is the site of Israel's Kfar Nahum National Park, after the original Hebrew from which the name "Capernaum" is derived. In Hebrew, "Kfar Nahum" means "village of comfort," in fact, and while we tend to think of Jesus making His way through hardscrabble villages, this was by no means always the case.

At least some of Capernaum's residents were a monied lot, as is evident even today when one walks through the ruins of the town. One resident, in particular, seemed to have done quite well for himself: Peter. Peter lived in Capernaum, and one can still see the ruins of the house where he resided, over which the Franciscans have constructed the Pilgrimage Church of St. Peter.

So when Peter encountered the Lord standing along the shore of the Sea of Galilee,<sup>2</sup> Peter was already a professional fisherman — and quite a commercially successful one at that, as evinced by the fact that he owned his own boat and employed others to help him. Today we'd say Peter was something of an entrepreneur. The same was true of James and John. But no one, no matter how good they are at what they do, wins 'em all, and even good fishermen strike out sometimes. When Jesus told Peter to "put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch,"<sup>3</sup> we can imagine Peter thinking to himself, "So ... this guy thinks he knows more about fishing than I do?". But there was something Peter sensed in Jesus that led him to trust Jesus. So, despite his reservations, Peter did what the Lord asked him to do — and filled his nets. Not only that. When Peter, James and John "brought their boats to the

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<sup>1</sup> See Mary K. Milne and Mark Allan Powell, "Sepphoris," *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (Revised and Updated,) Mark Allan Powell, ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 935.

<sup>2</sup> Lk 5:1-11 (NAB)

<sup>3</sup> Lk 5:4 (NAB)

shore, they left everything and followed him,”<sup>4</sup> Luke tells us. Think about that. They left their businesses behind, their homes, even their families. That’s remarkable enough in itself, made all the more so since Jesus hadn’t told them where they were going or what they’d be doing.

The calling of Peter, James and John illustrates the very meaning, the very heart, of faith: trust. Trust. We live in a very different time in a very different culture, and in our culture we tend to equate faith with belief. To have faith is to believe a certain proposition, or a set of propositions, to be true, as in, “I’ve read several forecasts and I believe, I have faith, it’s not going to rain on Monday.” But that’s not the biblical sense of faith or belief,<sup>5</sup> as the callings in today’s Gospel illustrate. Peter, James, and John really know nothing about Jesus at this point. They don’t hold anything to be true about Him because they know nothing at all about Him to adjudge true or false. All they know is that something in Him, something in their experience of Him, elicits their profound trust and confidence — and it isn’t just that He had a keen sense of where the fish were hiding.

Their response to Jesus echos Mary’s when, after Gabriel tells her she will give birth to the long-awaited Messiah, she asks, “How can this be ...?,” but nonetheless avows, “May it be done to me according to your word.”<sup>6</sup> We don’t know all there is to know. It’s a fair bet that an abbot knows more about what a monastery needs than a brand-spanking new novice.

There are limits to our understanding. There are some things that we not only *don’t* know, but *cannot* know because we’re not *intended* to know them. Accepting this and acknowledging our limitations is an important aspect of humility. Devout Jewish men wear a yarmulke, or “kippah” as it’s called in Hebrew, a skullcap that’s intended to remind them that, “You’re this big and no bigger.” A bishop’s skullcap, a “zucchetto” as it’s called, is a direct descendant of the Jewish one and is intended to remind bishops of the same thing. Whether

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<sup>4</sup> Lk 5:11 (NAB)

<sup>5</sup> See Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., Geoffrey W. Bromley, D.Litt., D.D., trans., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), v.6 p. 203ff for a discussion of “πιστεύω”.

<sup>6</sup> Lk 1:38 (NAB) For a discussion of the Lucan emphasis on these parallels, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 3: The Gospel of Luke*, Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., ed. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 90.

or not the message gets through to them is another matter entirely, about which perhaps the less said, the better.

Having the faith — that is, the trust, the confidence — to follow the Lord as He leads us into the unknown can be very difficult, even frightening, at times, if for no other reason than just as Jesus sent His Apostles to do His work with the instruction to “take nothing for the journey, neither walking stick, nor sack, nor food, nor money, and let no one take a second tunic,”<sup>7</sup> we’ll have to travel light as well. We might have to give up our expectations, or our preconceived ideas, or our allegiances, or our prejudices, or our desires, or most especially our self-centeredness.

Jesus calls us to our particular vocations, whatever they are, as an expression of His grace, His grace toward us and His grace toward the others who’ll be touched by the grace we carry if we answer His call. St. Augustine captured this quite well. He observed that, “God, who created you without you, will not save you without you,”<sup>8</sup> and stressed that such good as we do is to be credited to “[n]ot I, but the grace of God which is with me ... that is, not just me, but God with me; and therefore not the grace of God alone, nor myself alone, but the grace of God *and* myself.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus can tell us where the fish are, but we still need to row out and catch them. The nets won’t fill themselves, which is why Paul reminded the church in Corinth that “we are God’s co-workers; [we] are God’s field, God’s building.”<sup>10</sup>

And sometimes Jesus tells us that the path to salvation leads through cheese.

It sometimes leads through our dislikes, our fears, our disappointments, our sorrows, our struggles and our failings, for the mystery of grace is that these occasions, for however lamentable they are, often prove to contain within them moments of extraordinary grace and an invitation to a deeper relationship with the Author of all grace, though these seeds don’t necessarily sprout overnight. When we despair at the sight of empty nets, we need only recall

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<sup>7</sup> Lk 9:3 (NAB)

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *Sermon*, 169 13 quoted in Faculty of Theology of the University of Navarre, *The Navarre Bible: St. Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians* (New York: Scepter Publishers, 1999), 111.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, 5, 12 quoted in *The Navarre Bible: St. Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians*, 111.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Cor 3:9 (NAB)

Augustine's plea to remember that the grace of God is always with us, and the grace of God, like His word, "shall not return to me void," as the Lord told the prophet Isaiah, "but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Isa 55:11 (NAB)