

Epiphany V Year C 2025

The second semester of my sophomore year in college, I flunked French. That was when I learned that how well one performs in a particular subject was directly proportional to the number of times one attended class. My parents were not amused... my mother in particular. By the time my dad got home from work, I had been thoroughly chastised, and was so duly shriven, he took pity on me. I decided I would go to summer school to make up the lost credit hours. I had friends in Birmingham, and one such friend had a pullout sofa in his sublet apartment. So I set off to Birmingham, enrolled at UAB... and I even got a part time job laying tile and carpet, working for another friend's brother-in law. My parents were pleased, if not a little skeptical of my initiative. It was, I remember, a hot summer.

That summer was when the movie *All the President's Men* was released. A telling of the Watergate saga. For those of you old enough to remember, it was a movie about the people and the events that led to President Richard Nixon's resignation, beginning with Nixon's campaign team burglarizing the Democratic National Committee's headquarters, and its subsequent cover-up, and about the intrepid investigative reporters of the Washington Post, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, who broke the story. Nixon had only resigned just three years before the movie was made; and his resignation, at that time, was a scandal above all scandals.... The discovery of the cover-up of a botched, petty burglary looking for campaign dirt against the Democrats, that

brought down a president. It seemed such a seismic event at the time that would forever change America's love affair with the presidency, with America's devotion to an exceptional form of democracy, its invincible system of checks and balances. Of course, now, with the election of a convicted felon as president, and the fascist and contemptuous agenda of his administration, the Nixon affair seems so very small and inconsequential.

I remember only one line from the movie... a line uttered by Carl Bernstein's mysterious source from whom he would get essential pieces of information leading to the president's involvement in the scandal... "Follow the Money," the source would reiterate each time they met. That phrase has become iconic, prophetic, with regard to the United States Government, and for those who represent us in it. In the 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck, too, is prophetic in speaking of our capitalist economic system, a system that preys on the vulnerable in deference to corporate profits. He doesn't refer to capitalism as a monster... He calls it **The** monster, the monster with no conscience, just the insatiable desire for more. He notes that ultimately the so-called free enterprise system, so extolled by Adam Smith, who claimed it would be governed by the simplicity of supply and demand, would succumb to greed; that in such a system the rich and powerful get more powerful and richer; while the ever expanding cohort of the poor get poorer. Capitalism, it turns out, is a system for the elite, an institution of self-interest.

Steinbeck decried the faceless greed of emerging corporate America, whose only god was profit. The monster is soulless and unaccountable, and voracious. Perhaps there was a time when politicians, as citizens, had some sense of integrity and stewardship regarding the common good.... But not anymore. With no controls over corporate campaign contributions our elected officials, both Republican and Democrat, are now owned by the monster.... Follow the Money; whether it be a dollar or a denarius, things are forever the same: Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely... and wealth is the engine of power; and because of that, our system has failed us. Why are we surprised? Why don't we learn from the wisdom of history?

Why is it, that over human history... at least recorded history, we have looked to our institutions for perfection; not just perfection, but salvation? We, throughout history, have always yearned, naively, for a utopia... we've abdicated our present responsibilities in exchange for what might be... we actually say that in the U.S. Constitution... "We the people in order to create a more perfect union...." That, alas, is propaganda, or worse. In antiquity, people looked to kings to bring about a sustainable and just society.... It was purported that kings and their kingdoms were ordained by God... propaganda as well... and as the kingdoms fell, and the more democratic forms of government emerged... then it would be the system that would save us; a system operating under an ideology... our best and generous intentions, we thought. But as

always, power corrupts, and power metastasizes in institutions that lose sight of their purpose.... Follow the Money.

In the Gospel reading today In Luke, the writer is proposing an alternative plan; a revolutionary challenge to the status quo. And I think we have so over sentimentalized this passage that it has lost its meaning for us. The narrative has been depicted in the arts and in storybooks... peaceful contented fishermen, living freely in a rustic paradise... who are so blown away by the magic of Jesus that they drop everything and follow him. But I would say they're anything but contented. They live in a brutal system, a system stacked against them. Fishing is hard and dangerous work. It's unpredictable. There's no pay after a bad day's fishing. Taxes demanded by the imperial government were unbearable. The market middlemen unscrupulous. The wages these fishermen would make after the takes were hardly sustainable. These fishermen, like so many of the working poor lived in a dead end. Death in Life, as T.S. Eliot would put it. The system had beaten them down; the rich are just fine, and getting richer... and the poor, the poor have lost hope. They choose, I believe, Peter, here, the protagonist... they choose to follow Jesus simply out of desperation... desperation for life, desperation for a life of dignity and well-being that is simply sustainable. They have been offered their last hope.

Jesus tells these would be disciples... Don't be afraid of this improbable choice don't wallow in the illusion of unworthiness.... Because from now on, it won't be fish you are catching (or not)... from now on you will be catching people. Now the default

interpretation of this, that you and I have always heard preached, is that this is a call to evangelize people into a new belief system.... Go out and make converts to the Christian religion. Believe in and worship Jesus. Makes copies of the Nicene Creed and distribute them. But Jesus never intended to be worshipped. He preached a way of life. His message is a call to catch hold of people, our neighbor, the stranger... catch and rescue people from the deathly snares of empire. To catch them, and raise them up out of death into life. This is a call to catch people for community. There's life in community that is, shall we say, authentic. There has been some fairly recent scholarship that argues that what solidified the Jesus movement, what gave it staying power, was its commitment to inviting people to break bread, to share a meal; to live in a community that shared its resources; food, clothing, shelter. And when communities share what they have, there is always enough... that's what the miraculous feeding stories are all about in all four Gospels. Community engenders abundance. Jesus invites these would be disciples to live in a community that simply cares for each other. The preposterous metaphor in our story is the bulging net full of fish pulled up from the deep water... preposterous? I think not. To live in a committed community that looks out for each other is the practice of Love, and in Love there is an abundance of life, not just survival, but life... just the opposite of the dead ends of our systems deathly susceptible to power and self-interest. God dwells in the deep water of community.

In these dark days of power gone so terribly wrong, it is community that will save us. We can't change the macrocosmic reality of it all, but we can live locally, in our time and place, with integrity, and sacrifice, compassion, and mercy. We can practice the art of welcome and hospitality... and perhaps that may have influence on the unwieldy macrocosm... and, if we take Luke's words seriously, perhaps an exponential influence. Serving each other with integrity, speaking the truth, choosing courage, I believe, informs the world around us. The kingdom of God begins here, among us, begins where we are, this very day. Our institutions will never give it to us. The monster never gives, but The monster has been and always will be defeated by Love. Love has the power to bring life out of death. That is our witness. And there is no need to be afraid, no need to feel unworthy, brothers and sisters... because from now on, you will be catching people.