

The Center

The applause was deafening, but it did not resound in his heart. Patrick Lencioni had it all. When he graduated from college he got a managing job at a consulting firm, a job that was considered to be the number one job in America for a college graduate. He had a wonderful wife and four beautiful children. He wrote 11 books that sold over 5 million copies and they were translated into 30 different languages. The Wall Street Journal called him “one of the most ‘in demand’ speakers in America”.

He had it all and now he was speaking at Radio City Music Hall: one of the most prestigious stages in all of America where other celebrities and athletes and presidents had spoken and his speech that night was rated as the best one. As he received a thunderous applause, he walked off the stage, right out of the exit door, into St. Patrick’s Cathedral close by and fell on his knees. He felt so empty inside.

This can seem so shocking in some ways. A person who does everything right, has a relationship with God, and competent in their profession can still experience an existential angst, a deep emptiness, a profound dissatisfaction. So the question we want to ask ourselves tonight is: why did he, or why do we, sometimes experience this restlessness despite our successes and how do we solve it?

I think our readings today can help us understand this dynamic of the heart.

What’s amazing about having been to the Holy Land is that I can picture the people pressing upon Jesus along the Lake of Genessaret or the Sea of Galilee and then Jesus getting into the boat of Peter. This symbol is significant in our lives as it was for Peter. Getting into a fisherman’s boat requires trust. It would be similar to having a random person getting into your car: hey can I preach to this mob of people from the back of your car? Or if someone randomly sat beside you in your cubicle and started doing an online webinar with thousands of people right in your workstation.

So a relationship of trust had developed between Jesus and Peter and it might have been because of Jesus’ popularity. Peter could have used it for commercial or advertising reasons e.g. boat rides with Jesus or buy fish from me.

Either way, Jesus became part of Peter's life just like Jesus becomes a part of our life. We know about Jesus, we have heard or studied him. We go to mass and maybe even pray to Jesus in our lives. Even Patrick Lencioni prayed to Jesus, asked him for all those things he received. However, even though trust is important, that is not where the transformation happens because Jesus is only a part of our lives. Something more is required.

When Jesus was finished speaking to the crowds, he then boldly asked Peter to 'put out into the deep'. This is significant because Peter isn't just some amateur fisherman. He was a professional fisherman because he had his own boat, he knew that some of the best times to fish would be at night and not during the day. So imagine again that you are an engineer, stock broker and not only is this random guy sitting at your cubicle, he is telling you how to do your job: hey if you built the bridge over there I think it would be good or you wanna sell your stocks for that company because its value is gonna drop. Excuse me? Who are you? A carpenter?

So what prompted Peter to make such a radical move to lower down his nets?

Eric was your typical work hard/play hard engineering student from Vancouver. He would drink and do drugs and party all night, and then he would wake up the next day to go to his engineering classes or if it was Sunday he would wake up and go to mass with his parents. So he wore a variety of masks: his party mask with his friends, his excellent student mask in university and even his religious at mass. He did this so that he could win the affirmation of those around him.

One day he was invited to go to some Catholic young adult event. Despite telling himself that he didn't really want to go, he decided to go, and when he arrived, a beautiful girl on the other side of the room caught his eye. His initial resistance magically gave way to a newfound enthusiasm. Instead of making an obvious and creepy B-line for the girl, he started talking with the table closest to him, then he shifted to the next and to the next until he was sitting right beside her.

He tried to impress her so he started flipping around his different masks. He tried and tried but nothing seemed to work! She kept talking about her love for this Jesus person. When the group was asked to go into the Church to pray, Eric got an idea: I'll go ahead of this girl and kneel in the front of the Church to impress her!

Yet in that moment something profound hit him. He didn't know if that girl was behind him or if she went into the Church, but all he knew was that he was tired of wearing all these different masks, trying to impress all these different people whether it would be girls, or parents or friends. In that posture of prayer, he actually prayed for real for the first time, he let his masks fall and he met Jesus. Jesus came breaking into his life, Jesus was no longer just a part of his life but was at the center of his life, at the center of his boat.

The reason why Peter dropped his nets, the reason why Patrick felt so empty and the reason why Eric felt so tired of wearing all these masks was they had what I call the 'I've-been-fishing-all-night-and-have-caught-nothing' experience. It is the experience of expending huge amounts of energy trying to get fish, trying to get accolades and honor, trying to impress people with our masks, but at the end of the day we catch nothing: we aren't happy and there is something missing in our lives.

So Peter wanted to go deeper into his heart, he wanted to unlock the depths of his desires. So when Jesus calls him to lower his nets and put out into the deep, Peter experiences a resonance in his heart; he is tired of experiencing the futility of living for himself and he abandons himself to Jesus: but at your command I will lower the nets.

Peter suspects that this is no ordinary man. Indeed, when he catches that abundance of fish at an unexpected time and unexpected place, he knows right away that he is in the presence of God: Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man! Yet Jesus looks at him with a gaze that pierces beyond all the masks, all the accolades, all the books and bestsellers, and loves him in his weakness. And Peter experiences a love that gives new direction, new meaning and new purpose to his life such that it is worth leaving everything. Jesus is no longer a random dude in his boat, his cubicle, his car: Jesus is the commander of his boat. Peter chooses to put him at the center of his heart, at the center of his life.

We are invited today to ask whether Jesus is just a part of my life, on the outskirts of my life; is he just chilling on the deck or is he commanding the boat of our life?

What is the difference between having Jesus at the center of your life and a part of your life? When Jesus is a part of our life, WE are at the core of our decisions but when he is at the center of our life HE is at the core of our decisions. Everything passes through him: when should I go to bed, what should I eat, watch, the music I listen to. Everything. At that moment of darkness, Patrick Lencioni recognized that it is only Jesus. It is only in him that I can find that which truly fulfills my life.

As we prepare to receive the Eucharist, we sing the Holy, Holy, Holy to remind us that God is truly present and not only is he present, he desires to be consumed, to enter into your heart. And so you have a choice today if this is your first time to put him in the center of your heart or renew that desire; enthrone him in your hearts. Jesus I don't want you to be just a part of my life anymore, I want you to be at the center of my boat, at the center of my life.