

Sermon for Trinity 5 – Luke 5:1-11

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on [Jesus] to hear the word of God, He was standing by the lake of Gennesaret.” When our Lord calls his very first disciples, the setting does not take place in the sterile haven of the synagogue. The congregation was not a hushed assembly listening to an eloquent exposition of a favorite psalm. No, instead the unkempt multitude presses around Jesus on a smelly fish landing. Tired fishermen lingered nearby, cleaning their empty nets after a long, fruitless night. Jesus, who is clean, pure and holy, enters the world of unclean and sinful people rather than expecting them to step out of that world and come to him. In theology we call this the incarnation: God takes on human flesh in Jesus Christ to bridge the gap between perfect God and sinful mankind. Jesus comes into our dark and filthy world to make sinners clean and give us life.

“Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon’s, [Jesus] asked him to put out a little from the land. And He sat down and taught the people from the boat.” Jesus begins “fishing” from a fisherman’s boat. By “fishing” I mean He is engaged in catching people, and as He does so, He gives new life. Peter was using that same boat to catch fish and in the process, they die. However, our Lord is using this boat to catch dead people and make them alive. These two kinds of fishing will come together before the story is finished.

When our Lord’s teaching session concludes, we would expect Jesus to thank Peter, ask to be taken back to shore, and proceed on His merry way. But that’s not what happened ...

“And when he had finished speaking, [Jesus] said to Simon, ‘Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.’ Amazingly, Jesus, the land-loving, son of a carpenter, gives orders to a professional fisherman on how and where to catch fish! What a preposterous suggestion! Peter was exhausted. He and his partners had fished all night and caught nothing. They worked at night for one simple reason—the fish in the Sea of Galilee (and elsewhere) feed at night. During the daytime, they hide in the depths and under rocks to stay cool. Also, during the light hours, the fish can see and avoid the nets. The very idea that this carpenter from the Nazareth highlands, who has likely never wet a line should presume to tell a seasoned fishing captain what to do is absurd. The order to launch nets into the deeps in broad daylight is ridiculous!

To be clear, Peter cannot enter into rabbinic debates. The ceremonial law and the finer points of Sabbath observance escape him. Also, maybe some of the teachings that Jesus spoke earlier to the crowd from his boat remained a mystery to him. But what Peter does know is a great deal about fishing! So how does Peter respond to Christ’s seemingly ludicrous command to put out the nets on the other side? “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.”

Permit me to paraphrase the irritated fisherman’s response: “Listen Teacher! My boys and I are professionals. We know where the fish feed—it’s along the shore, and the best time to catch them is at night. If you hadn’t guessed yet, that’s why we were out on the lake *all* last night. We’re not stupid! We’ve just worked the best fishing areas and caught nothing. We’re dead tired, and I’ve stayed awake a few *more* hours—to let you use my boat. You rabbis think you know everything and now you order me to fish during broad daylight in deep water?!? Very well! Let’s go out and we’ll see who knows what about fishing!!!”

Tired and disgruntled, Peter orders his team to push out from the shore once again. And was he ever in for a surprise... “And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink.” So many fish! Not even 2 boats could contain them! All night, every night, Peter and his crew plied their trade in hopes of netting the

great catch. Their sleep was likely punctuated with vivid dreams of that faint possibility. It's akin to winning the lottery, or like a stock trader who buys shares hoping against hope for the lucky day when those stocks will jump dramatically in price and he will make a windfall. But Peter is a fisherman! This net-tearing, boat-sinking catch can make him and his team filthy rich! At last he has hit the jackpot, far beyond his wildest dreams!

Notice that Jesus approaches Peter at the point of Peter's greatest strength: his ability as a fisherman. Sometime during the midst of the great catch excitement, Peter must have wondered: How did He do it? Did Jesus somehow discover a new spring that had suddenly opened up on the lake floor where fish had gathered? Was there a new fishing bank formed under water where the fish were feeding? Peter knew full well that any man with such knowledge could become very rich in a matter of weeks. So why was this penniless rabbi without a "reel job" (pun intended!) wandering around teaching people for no material gain? How could His teaching possibly be more important than two boatloads of fresh fish? Evidently, this Jesus cared more about God and people than He did about acquiring great wealth. Peter found himself face to face with a person who challenged his priorities on the deepest level: before Peter stands a man who made a definitive choice between God and money and He chose God.

All these thoughts flying through Peter's head and he finally responds. The Scripture says, "But when Simon Peter saw [the catch], he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.'" Peter realizes that it's more than just what Jesus did that made Him great, even deeper than that—it's who Jesus is. Only God could make a gigantic catch of fish swarm in broad daylight. Peter rightly calls him "Lord" for this is the very God who created heaven and earth, standing before him in His very boat—God in the flesh! And like the prophet Isaiah in the temple, Peter sensed that he was in the presence of holiness and that he was unclean and he should be avoided lest he defile that holiness. Peter stunk more than of just fish guts. He reeked of guilt. He reeked of sin. Now he stood before the All Holy God with nothing to cover his shame. Filled with awe, he was afraid. Fear and astonishment also seized his fishing partners, James and John, the Sons of Zebedee, and should also seize us. For we too are not unlike Peter and company: so focused on temporal things that we lose sight of things eternal. The day-to-day becomes our only reality. Have we not also been discontent with what God has given us?

We lose sight of who we are. Peter came to learn it. And we say with him, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Notice that this is the first time the word "sinner" is used in Luke's Gospel. And the good news? Jesus came to seek and save sinners, even we sinners!

Jesus caught dead, sinful men in a boat. By His word of forgiveness He made them alive. By His holiness, He declares them holy. Jesus also assures Peter that his fishing skills will still be needed, but with one exception. At the beginning of the story Jesus told Peter to "let down the nets for a catch." At the end Jesus tells Peter, "... you will be catching men." In English, it's the same word: "to catch." But in the original Greek, it's 2 different words: first, "let down your nets for a *hagras*," that is, "to catch with the intent to kill," much the same we might think of fishing or hunting. But in the second instance, "from now you will *zo-gron* men," that is, "to catch alive, to capture, to catch what is dead and make alive." What a profound thought! From the very same boat that Peter had caught fish to kill, Jesus caught dead men and made them alive!

And Jesus is still at work catching us dead men today and giving us life, through His sent messengers in the means of grace God provides. Jesus bridges the gap between God's holiness and our sin. Do not be afraid. He makes you clean. He makes you holy. Your sins are forgiven. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠