

WE'RE GONNA NEED A BIGGER NET

Luke 5:1-11

25 July 2021

for Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC

Our Gospel text this morning comes from Luke, chapter 5, verses 1-11.

Listen once more for the word of God:

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, ‘Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.’ ⁵Simon answered, ‘Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.’ ⁶When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!’ ⁹For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.’ ¹¹When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

The word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

What did the fisherman tell the magician?

Take a cod, any cod.

You see, it’s funny because a cod is a fish, right? And magicians wow you with their card tricks? Maybe funnier if the fisherman is Bostonian, *take a caaad, any caaad.*

Maybe it’s just not funny, but here’s the thing. The proverbial well is dry when it comes to this particular pericope. “Fishers of men” is an image so pervasive in Christian culture, so saturated in the zeitgeist that it barely needs explanation.

There's the fishers of men ministry, a nation-wide 12 week course on "face-to-face evangelism." There's the Fishers of Men National Fishing Tournament, building up fishermen for the Lord in Chapin, S.C., the Fishers of Men Meat and Seafood Corporation, each pound of shrimp comes with a side of scripture, and the Fishers of Men Lure Company, where God blesses all our catches.

Not so long ago I saw a church sign down by Lake Greenwood, "Be ye fishers of men. You catch 'em, he'll clean 'em." I don't know what that means, but at this point I think my cod joke wasn't half bad.

I'll give it to Jesus, "fishers of men," is an evocative image. Go, catch folks. Evangelize 'em. Reel 'em in.

Now we don't talk about evangelism much here — our denomination as a whole tends to shy away from the idea. It means *too much* these days, shorthand for how you vote, or your beliefs about Covid, or how many drum sets you prefer in your worship service. But the core command, usually preached in the context of this passage, remains, Jesus calls his disciples to cast their nets for men, to follow and reel in an arena's worth of a haul. *Take a cod, any cod.*

By the time we get to chapter five in Luke's gospel, Jesus has attracted a substantial following. After being rejected at Nazareth he went on to heal a woman on the brink of death, exorcise a demon, and proclaim throughout the countryside release to captives and the year of God's favor.

The crowds press in to hear what's next — following the itinerant preacher so closely that by the time he gets to Gennesaret, he finds himself driven to the edge of the water. There, an enterprising crew was cleaning up after an unsuccessful night fishing. The preacher senses an opportunity. Having been rejected at the synagogue, Jesus opts this day to teach from the boat's stern. He inquires after the captain, and Simon agrees to give him a platform, to cast out a few yards from the shore and create an amphitheater from which Jesus can teach without the throng pressing in.

Luke doesn't give us the contours of this particular sermon, but I imagine it was an announcement of the kingdom much like the one in Nazareth, and that it enthralled those who heard. Simon's interest was surely piqued. The man who had been fishing all night, who was just wrapping up when this teacher commandeered his ship, called Jesus "master" after the sermon, called him "Master" even after Jesus made a confounding

suggestion — a further demand on Simon’s energy that ignored the realities of the night prior — *cast your net in the deep*.

It was absurd on a number of fronts. Firstly, the time to catch fish with linen nets is not during bright Mediterranean mornings. Secondly, they’d already been out all night with nothing to show for it. But Simon, enthralled by the teacher and hoping to call it a day soon enough, felt no compunction to argue. He cast his nets.

And where there once was nothing, Simon now found himself with a haul so large that his boat began to capsize. His partners rushed over, but even a second boat could barely manage the catch.

That the nets held up is a miracle in itself. But the bounty? The bounty was beyond Simon’s imagining.

Okay, one more joke.

Why is fishing such a good business?

The net profits.

That’s not bad, right? It could be worse. Simon, who before meeting the Lord had nothing but two boats and host of empty nets, nets a year’s worth of fish. Stop reading at verse seven and it’s the kind of good news story the world likes to hear, a clear-cut cause-and-effect gospel whose benefits are plain, the kind of truth we hear from Joel Olsteen and and Creflo Dollar. Proximity to Jesus leads to fat wallets and full nets. Believe and receive!

Here’s the problem — it’s the same one we had last week: the story’s not over. As soon as he manages the haul, Jesus demands Simon leave it all behind.

Occasionally, I think, in order to dull the demand of stories like this, we picture the disciples as having been materially poor. It’s easier to imagine that when they left everything to follow Jesus they didn’t have to leave much. But that picture doesn’t track with the story we’re given. The man who will become Peter runs a small fishing enterprise with two boats and two associates Fishing is no mere trifle for this trifecta, it is their livelihood. Were he not a good fisherman, Simon would not have the capital for the boats. He wouldn’t have the delicate linen nets used in night fishing. He would not know the sellers at the market.

He may not have been the wealthiest man in Galilee, but Simon had something to lose, and something in him recognized that despite the fish spilling out over the nets he was about to lose it.

What else could explain verse eight? Suddenly rich with fish, Simon demands that Jesus leave.

Simon instinctively understood this catch was more than *prosperity*. He may not have been able to rattle off an affirmation of faith, but he *knew* that this man carried something with him of the divine, and he knew from stories of Prophets and Kings that an encounter with God leaves its mark. A moment before, Simon called Jesus “Master” — now, begging him to leave, he calls Jesus “Lord.”

“Lord,” he says, “go away, for I am a sinful man.” Now just like “evangelism,” the word “sinful” has its complications in our long history. And you might be tempted to read all sorts of “sins” into Simon. But Luke tells us that at the bottom of his “sin” was amazement. His was not some moral failure, it was a recognition of distance and demand. Simon Peter saw that morning the space between a fisherman and the Lord, he saw in this man what he was not, and he knew that a gift freely given was also a demand on his life.

“A call to discipleship,” wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “immediately creates a new situation.” In that first moment Simon would rather have drowned with his fish than be caught with his Lord.

Y’all remember way back at the beginning of the sermon just after my excellent *cod* joke when we talked about evangelism?

When we tell this story we usually recall the version first set out by Mark and then retold by Matthew. That’s where the famous line comes from — *follow me and I will make you fishers of men*.

But that’s not what Luke reports Jesus to have said.

Simon Peter is afraid. Jesus recognizes his fear. But Jesus does not leave the boat. Jesus stays and clarifies the call: “*from now on you will be catching people.*”

I don't particularly like the idea of being fishers of men. We catch fish and either return them to the water with a hole in their cheek or find them on our dinner plates. Applied to a human, "fishing" is rather unappetizing. There is no net large enough to compel me to fish for folks. And anyway, a primitive understanding of "fishing" seems to illuminate the worst of evangelism: coercive, unconcerned with difference, focused on *more* — bigger nets, larger gatherings, numbers for number's sake.

Luke's correction isn't quite as memorable but it offers a powerful clarification. What is the difference between "fishing for men" and "catching people"? Part of it depends on the Greek, lost almost entirely to our memory of the scene and the limitations of the English translation. The word that the NRSV editors have chosen to translate "catch" has a long history in ancient literature. It is not simply a net — a catch. This word *zōgrōn*, denotes in almost every instance a rescue.

Jesus isn't asking Peter to go ply his trade for men — to indiscriminately haul in more and more, to get them to the altar and to the pews, as if the kingdom is about net profits and raw numbers, and not living and breathing people. Jesus is asking Peter to follow him and be a part of the rescue, to be a partner in granting life.

Evangelism can be a dirty word in sophisticated circles. But what if it means simply — to use the language of the prophet Micah — doing justice, loving kindness, and *walking — following? — humbly with God*. What if in our pursuit of justice we grant life, if in loving kindness we give space for freedom, if in following we find the spark of divinity granted each of us simply by our being?

Here's the trick, though. Before all of that going, we too have to find ourselves caught, and we have to leave something behind. Simon Peter, the enterprising fisherman, having received all he needed, in choosing to follow Jesus has to walk away. The boats, the impossible haul, all left behind.

"A call to discipleship immediately creates a new situation."

One last joke:

Why don't fish play soccer?

They're afraid of the net.

Many folks in this room have been going to church since before we knew it. We didn't need to be hauled in we are already here.

Do our lives need to look different on account of God's call — is God's call to fishermen different than God's call to bankers, nurses, teachers, doctors, and preachers? Is it still a risk to a cradle Presbyterian?

We like to think of ourselves as already caught, no longer in need of rescue, but I wonder if our certainty is nothing more than a fear of the net, a willingness to drown with our bounty (with the world we know) rather than go with our God.

If we are truly going to follow—if all of this is more than simply showing up and dressing up, checking a demographic box and reciting a few creeds—our lives cannot look as if our faith makes no difference. God's rescue should leave its mark.

Perhaps we don't have to walk away from our boats, but there are a host of things that we ought to leave behind. God's claim on our lives means walking away from a world that worships profit, elevates strong men, builds capital on the backs of the oppressed, and disdains difference.

It means leaving behind things as they are and moving toward things as they were created to be. As with Peter, the rescue may inspire in us some measure of fear.

But there stands Jesus, alongside of us and ahead of us, leading us away from our boats, rich with profit, but empty with meaning.

Simon Peter hears the call. Go and catch people. But first he has to leave the boat. He has to allow grace to transform his life so that he can go do the same.

That's our call too. Leaving, and in the going, finding ourselves free. Leaving, and in the going, capturing a weary world finally in thrall to the kingdom. Finding the net, and in so doing finding our freedom and the world's. *Amen.*

—Leigh Stuckey