

“Fishing”

Luke 5:1-11

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Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He 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. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, ‘Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.’ Simon answered, ‘Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.’ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signalled 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. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!’ For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and 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.’ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Prayer.

It may come as somewhat of a surprise to some, but I'm not a natural born and raised fisherman. Yes, I fly fish. My skills are attributed to Pete VanDusen, who taught me to fly fish when I was in my late twenties. As a child I was never exposed to fishing; didn't even know it was a hobby or sport. No one in my family fished. I don't like worms, snakes, or anything cold blooded, so I would have naturally kept it at a distance. Even after Pete taught me the finer aspects of fly fishing, I never had the heart to kill my catch, let alone clean them. To this day I've never cleaned a fish. I wear it as a proud accomplishment that I've always been a catch and release fly fisherman.

In a world where numbers and statistics tend to be used liberally to define success, most people, when hearing that I'd recently been fishing, undoubtedly will ask “how many did you catch?” “Oh, one or two,” I'll answer.

From the look on their face, I know rather quickly that they have categorized me as a novis, a lightweight. It is OK with me, because I know that I won't have to be burdened with their personal accounts of fishing accomplishments (usually with

bait), silly questions – such as “Have you ever seen the movie “A River Runs Through It”?”, or a “top-that-testimony” fishing story. When I tell people that I didn't catch any, or just one or two, the conversation usually turns to something else.

What most people don't understand is that, for me, fly fishing isn't about catching fish. It is about being alone with my thoughts and prayers, being in a place I'd otherwise never go. It is about spending time without the worry of time. It is all about the experience and the awareness of being a part of a larger divine reality, where fish become blessings, and the warm sun, the drops of rain, or the mist of fog is affirmation.

As mainline churches have been hemorrhaging members over the past thirty years in America, an evangelical frenzy took hold of every preacher in search of a program. The “church growth” movement swept like wildfire, supplying simple recipes to boost the numbers. Conversations at annual conference became arenas for the super-ego, boasters, and braggarts. “How many do you get out on a Sunday?” - similar to “How many fish did you catch? - became the question that quickly summed up a pastor's effectiveness.

Worship became performances. Preachers ditched their robes and put on Land's End sweaters. Hymns were replaced with praise music. And contemporary became the new snobbery. It was all about feeling good, and orthodox ritual couldn't compete; it failed to remain relevant. If you hadn't started a second service with a contemporary praise band, you simply were not making the grade.

For a moment, this approach had some appeal to me. In time, I have come to see how shallow and ineffective the “church growth” movement really is. While there are some examples of success, from my perspective, it has only accelerated the rate of decline. When people are treated as numbers, treated with a superficial “feel good at all costs” theology, more people leave through the back door than ever can be replaced with new people coming in the front.

Sin can't be avoided. Illness, disease, and suffering can't be ignored, or programed away simply by scheduling healing services. The depths and complexity of life deserves a more complete diet of spiritual food; a diet that follows the example of Jesus and how he called and nourished his disciples.

With Jesus, it's never about quantity. He never asks how many fish Simon has caught. By today's standards, Jesus would have been relegated a failure and had his pastoral effectiveness evaluated by the Board of Ordained Ministry. In three years he assembled only 12 men, and possibly an equal number of women; hardly a rating of “fair” or “good” in any annual employee evaluation.

Jesus simply tells Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

Our problem today is that we are wowed by the miracle, the nets full of fish. For us, in our modern, statistically driven world, nets that are full and overflowing draw our attention. But for Jesus, relating to the fishermen Simon, James, and John, the miracle is nothing more than a tool that is used to lead them to discipleship. The miracle isn't the point; it never is the point with Jesus. The miracle points to a deeper and more important reality. The text reads "When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!'"

Now we're getting somewhere.

Discipleship begins with repentance. It is a willing desire to come on over and join the rest of us sinners. It is the grand equalizer; that recognizes nothing about the man or woman, other than the fact that we are all sinners.

Money, status, education, certifications or degrees doesn't make a difference. In fact, they probably create more harm than good, making pride a significant barrier. What matters to Christ is recognition of the elephant in the room, and it is an elephant that few want to talk about – the fact that every one of us lives with an element of sin in our life. We are all standing in the cesspool together.

"I am a sinful man" or "I am a sinful woman" hangs words to our experience and makes it real. You've probably heard "confession is good for the soul." It is. It puts every one of us in a pair of waders, with a rod and reel, out in the middle of a Montana trout stream. Confession puts every one of us down on our knees before the Communion table.

"Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.'"

The fact that we are sinful must not be allowed to become a convenient excuse for paralyzing fear. Yes, we should fear sin. We should avoid it at all costs. But that isn't the direction that Jesus is leading. From now on, we are catching people; people whom God sends our way.

The people in our lives are more than coincidental acquaintances. God puts them into our lives for a reason. They come to us looking for the same answers to questions that come to you and me. They come broken by sin, just like you and me. They come to us that we might be the ones who catches them, for Christ's sake. And if we don't do it, there are a hundred others who will do their best at catching them, too. It may not be today, or tomorrow. But we can rest assured

that God will, one day, smile and receive them home.

One common problem, as I see it, is when we make the simple substitution of catching with saving. Not one of us can save another soul. We can't even save ourselves. This is why we've been given a Savior, Jesus Christ. The difference is subtle, but important: we do the catching, Jesus does the saving.

Catching people may result in huge numbers, but more likely, it will result in growing disciples deep; spending a lifetime walking together on our journey of faith. In place of numbers, effectiveness is defined with how close one has become drawn into the life of Christ.

Finally, God has given us all the talents and tools we need to be effective catchers of people. This is the one and only full-time job you'll ever have in your life where no experience is necessary.

Do you have a warm heart? Do you have a desire to draw closer to Jesus? Then simply join hands with another, and come forward together. Bring the children. Invite the neighbor. Encourage a coworker. Before you know it, you'll be catching people right and left and you won't even be realizing it!

Dearly beloved, let go of those media slick programs to boost numbers, attendance, or income. Let go of the modern measures of effectiveness. Be humbled by your sin, and join the ranks of confessed sinners, along with the rest of us. You're in good company. And you'll be joining a two thousand year historical call to be Christ's disciples.

Come. Leave your nets behind. And come, let us fish for people, that we might walk together the journey of faith. Amen.