

Scott L. Thompson

First Presbyterian Church, Willmar, MN

February 10, 2019

Luke 5: 1-11

Jesus Calls the First Disciples

5Once 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.

I don't know about you all, but I'm somewhat of an expert at fishing all day or night and catching nothing. It's a skill I've cultivated after many years of arriving at the hot fishing spot the day after the bite is finished. Or showing up to the lake with the bait nothing is biting on. So I can relate to Simon Peter and friends who've fished all night and caught nothing. But we're meant to relate to Simon, James, and John. They are our models for the life of discipleship. They were the ones called by Jesus to be his disciples and we inherited their calling and responsibilities.

So you may not have thought of yourself as such, but if you are a follower of Jesus, you are a disciple of Jesus. What is a disciple, you may ask? A disciple is

simply a student, or a follower of Jesus. Someone who has decided to learn what he teaches, to go where he leads us, and to do what he asks.

And if these stories are meant to be our models for discipleship, then that means that if we're to be Christ's disciples, then we need to be fisherman. Here's what that means for us:

First, we're meant to **cast our nets into the deep waters**. We learn in the story that, after teaching the multitudes on shore from the security of the fishing boat, Jesus tells Simon Peter to "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." (v 4). To the ancient Hebrews the word for deep water had a lot of resonance. The deep waters represented chaos. Think of the waters at the dawn of the Jewish creation story in Genesis 1. They are a heaving mass of deep mystery, disorder, and chaos. Until the Spirit of God, hovering over the water, begins to speak, and brings structure, order, and life out of the mess.

For us the deep water lies beyond these four walls, in the world we live in. There too is found a chaotic mix of people, cultures, and forces that mix and swell like the heaving waters of a storm-tossed sea. And some of these forces are hostile to God and the work of the Gospel. But some are not...

Which brings us to the next step of discipleship: **we are meant to cast our nets into the deep waters to catch people**. We don't know what it was like for Peter, James, and John, who had been fruitlessly fishing all day to suddenly have their nets swollen and breaking with fish. But this abundant catch was clearly intended by Jesus to be a sign of their calling to be disciples; to, "not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." (v.10). Their calling to catch people is ours too.

And this is where things get really cool, if we were to be reading in the ancient Greek. Jesus says, "from now on you'll be *catching* people." And it takes what may seem at first glance to be an abrupt, and somewhat violent metaphor - *catching* people, just like catching fish in a net and hauling them aboard a boat - and changes it. Because the word Jesus uses here is actually not the word ordinarily used for catching fish. Scholar Peter Eaton tells us that instead of the word behind the phrase, "you will be catching people." Like one would catch fish for eating, it is actually closer to the phrase to the meaning of you "will be 'taking' or 'saving' men and women *alive*' for the kingdom. 'To take men and women

alive' is a very different image from simply catching them as though they are food to be consumed. As John Drury reminds us, the verb is 'used in the Septuagint to denote rescue from peril of death, not the capture of animals –and so [it is] as appropriate to fishing as it is appropriate to the kingdom mission which it initiates.'" So, we might read this phrase instead as, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be **rescuing** people."¹ As disciples, we're meant to put our nets down into the deep water chaos of the world, in order to **rescue people**.

This is in accord with our essential calling as Christ's disciples. We have our command and commission from Jesus, who, in Matthew 28: 18-20 tells us, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

If the church is stocked with the modern day disciples, following in Peter, James, and John's footsteps, then we are meant to go out into the world, cast our nets, and rescue people from the chaos of the world. We are a rescue service for God. We are fishing for people in order to help God to save them from the very powers of sin and death.

So, it gives us pause to take notice and ask the question, "are we casting our nets in the deep waters?" Or are we bobbing along with Jesus on the swells with our nets in the bottom of the boat alongside of us? Or, possibly, have we grown tired of fruitless fishing and have put down our nets?

Either way, I think the timing of Jesus' miracle is important. I think it's significant that Jesus came to Simon Peter *after* he'd been fruitlessly fishing for so long: *after* his arms were tired from repeatedly casting and dragging heavy nets into and out of his boat; *after* he'd given up on the whole thing, thinking that the seas were empty that day and devoid of fish; *after* he'd given up on relying on his own skill and prowess as a fisherman, because he just wasn't going to be good enough to catch anything *that day*.

¹ Eaton, Peter. "Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1." Homeiletical Perspective on Luke 5: 1-11. WJK Press. Louisville. 2009. Pg. 335.

Because all that does is to serve to heighten just how miraculous the bounty of the miraculous catch really is: Swelling nets, bursting the seams of the cords, multiple boats with numerous men required to haul it in; boats sinking under the weight of the fish. The sign here for all of us is this: When we have the obedience to cast our nets in faith, it's not our doing the results in the abundant catch – it's not our prowess as fishermen – it's not our abilities in whatever capacities we might possess – it's a work of God that results in the abundant catch. It's the power of the Gospel. It's work of the Holy Spirit. It's the will of Jesus to rescue us from the powers of sin and death and chaos that is at work in and through us to save us. We have a part to play in this, we cast the nets, but it's a small role we play. God chooses to involve us, but it's God's kingdom work that allows it to succeed.

When Peter realizes what has happened, that he is standing before the Messiah, and he has participated in a mighty work of God, he gets this. He realizes that he has had a brush with the divine - that he is standing in the presence of the holy - and that his humble fishing boat has suddenly become sacred space. He falls to his knees and confesses his unworthiness. It is only then that he is able to receive his commission from Jesus. And this is grace: that we are all like Peter, unworthy, like him, for we are sinful men and women, but that Jesus has chosen us to be his disciples nonetheless. For when we fall to our knees and confess our faith in his saving grace, it is only then that we have become true disciples. It is only then that we realize that our nets will fill only because of the work of God and Spirit of God enlivening our mission. It is only then that we realize that it is not our prowess as fisherman that will allow us to succeed, it is all God.

We're not alone in our boats. Our savior is there with us. He is here, with us. Do we have the courage to cast our nets? There is deep water out there. And there are people that need rescuing. Will be our nets that save them? May it be so.

Alleluia and Amen.