

“Let Down Your Nets For a Catch”

Luke 5:1-11

Trinity 5

July 11 – 12, 2009

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today's Gospel is about fishing-catching fish, catching people. But there's a fundamental mistake we usually make with this image. We tend to think of fishing the way we do it here in Illinois: bait your hook, throw in a line, and if it's a good day, reel in your catch. And so we apply this imagery to how people should be drawn in to the church. First, the thinking goes, we need to come up with some bait, something to excite and interest people so that we can hook them and yank them into the church. What will attract the youth or this or that group of people? We need talented performers to entertain people and high quality programs like Christian aerobics and day care to meet the people's needs. We need to make that Gospel hook seem nice and comfortable and harmless so that our intended quarry will take a big bite and get good and snagged.

But there are two problems with that image. First of all, bait is all about fooling the fish as to your true intentions, right? You offer it the lure of food only to make it food for you. It's about trickery and manipulation. And that is not the way of our God. His is the way of truth. His is the way of saying what we need to hear, not what we want to hear, so that we may be saved. The holy church of Christ can never be in the bait and switch business, like a company which advertises a certain product at a low price to get you into the store, only to tell you once you're there that they're out of that particular item but they have plenty of other items that cost a wee bit more. We're not here to fake people into becoming Christian. What sort of disciples would that really produce, anyway? Jesus, rather, was always

right out front, as He is in Luke 14, **“Whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.”**

Of course, the other problem with our usual fishing image is that in the Gospel it's not a rod and reel and bait that are being used but a net. And that's a whole different kind of fishing. The net is cast, which is to say, the Word of God is proclaimed. And through Christ's Word, fish are drawn in to the boat of the Church as together many hear and believe His preaching.

That's what was going on at the beginning of the Gospel. Many were pressing in around Jesus to hear Him speak the words of God. Because of the crowds, Jesus gets into a boat and asks Simon to put out a little from shore. The reflection of the sound off of the water enables a larger number of people to hear. Peter's boat becomes a pulpit. From the boat our Lord preaches His Word of salvation to the people. Christ is in the boat for the people, drawing them to Himself. Like a fisherman, He casts the net of the Gospel to draw the fish into the boat.

So it is still today. The place where you are sitting is called the nave of the church. **“Nave”** is Latin for **“boat.”** The people of God even now press in around Jesus to hear His Word, because Christ is here in the boat. You fish, who swim in the waters of baptism, are drawn in by His teaching. The Word of God still reflects off of the baptismal water, calling you to repentance and to faith in Jesus, bringing you everlasting life.

Our Lord then proceeds to perform a miracle which illustrates the miracle of salvation which He accomplishes through His preaching. Jesus says to Simon Peter, **“Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.”** Now Simon knows that no fisherman goes to the deep for a catch. Fishermen stay in the shallows where the nets can reach the fish. Furthermore, Simon knows that no fisherman fishes in the heat of the day but when the sun is down. What our Lord commands Simon to do here makes no sense. This is not how it's done.

But this is the way it's done with the Lord. Just as the Spirit of God hovered over the deep in the beginning at creation, so our Lord goes to the

deep. To the very depths of sin and death our Lord goes to pull up His catch of sinful men by water and the Word and to create in us new life.

This is the foolishness of the Gospel spoken of in the Epistle. It doesn't seem logical the way God operates. It doesn't seem reasonable to us that the church should grow simply by the preaching of Christ crucified, by baptizing and teaching. There must be other techniques we should employ, other things we have to add to that. But our Lord purposely has chosen things that are foolish and weak in the eyes of the world to put to shame those who are strong and wise in their own eyes. He does what runs to counter to our thinking to accomplish His saving purposes, so that no one may boast in His presence, but that we may boast in the Lord alone and glory in His mercy.

“Launch out into the deep,” our Lord says in unconventional fashion. Not only in the safe, white, suburbs, but in the cities, in sparsely populated rural areas, not only to people who seem open to Christian spirituality but also to the **“unspiritual.”** Not only to young families with children, but to people of every age and color and nationality and marital status. The church is given to proclaim the Gospel wherever Christ gives us opportunity-me by preaching in this place and in my visits; and you by confessing your faith in your daily callings out there as family members and workers and citizens and neighbors, so that others might be drawn in to get caught in the net of Christ's teaching and thereby enter His boat. Sometimes the catch will come in surprising places.

Peter responded at first by saying, **“Master, we toiled all night and caught nothing.”** By nature we labor in the darkness apart from the Lord. From our own efforts comes nothing. However, in the Light of Christ Peter goes on to say, **“At Your Word I will let down the nets.”** Purely by faith Simon surrenders all that he knows and all that he has experienced and lets down the nets. So it is to be in the Church. Not our word but Jesus' Word is our life and salvation. What counts is not what seems reasonable and practical to us, but what is good and right in the sight of the Lord. The still, small voice of the Gospel of Christ crucified, which is foolishness to the world, is the power of God to us. His truth orders our lives.

Simon does what our Lord commands, not worrying what the result will be, and the nets fill up. The nets do not seem to be able to hold all the catch; they are beginning to break and some fish are escaping, just as when the net of the Gospel is cast, not all believe what is preached; not all are drawn in to the boat. There have been several people in this place whom I have drawn in with the net of the Gospel in preaching and adult instruction but who have since slipped away, out of the nets back into the depths of this world. Simon calls to his partners on shore to come out with their boat. With his partners both boats are filled so that it seems that they will not make it back to shore. So great is the catch of fish that one boat cannot hold them all.

These two boats stand for the Old and the New Testaments. In the Old Testament God's grace came to Abraham and his descendants, the Israelites. But God's grace abounds. He desires that all men be saved. So He lowers the nets and-unexpectedly to many-takes in not only the children of Abraham, but also the Gentiles from the deep, from all the nations of the earth.

Peter's reaction to this miracle seems a bit surprising. **“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!”** This mighty work of Jesus causes Peter to see that he was in the presence of the holy God. And so the unbelief that remains in Peter rises up and begins to overwhelm him. **“God is holy. God hates sin. I am a sinner. I am lost.”** But that is the preaching of the devil. The devil is good at preaching only half of the truth. Peter is indeed a sinner, as are you. God does indeed hate sin, with a passion. Sinners do die.

However, the One who stands before Simon Peter, and before you this day, Jesus the Son of God, did not come into this world to condemn the world but to save the world-to rescue Peter, and to rescue you. Just as Simon trusted in the Lord when he went out to catch fish in the deep, so now you are to trust in the Lord as He speaks His incredible mercy to you. To the sinner who in shame says, **“Depart from me, Lord”** Jesus says, **“Do not be afraid.”** Notice our Lord doesn't say, **“Oh, that's okay, it's not really that bad.”** No, our Lord says, **“Do not be afraid.” “You are forgiven. I have taken on your very flesh and blood to sanctify you and**

make you holy. Your sins have been paid for by my cross, so that now you can stand before a holy God and live. Do not be afraid. Believe. You are Mine. You are reconciled to the Father through Me.”

And finally, our Lord does one more amazing thing. He says to Peter, **“From now on you will catch men.”** In other words He makes this sinner into an apostle and a preacher of the Gospel, so that more fish, more slippery characters might be drawn into the boat. Let us remember, then, not to glorify the preachers Christ calls and ordains—they are sinners like anyone else. Let us rather glorify Christ who goes so far as to use fallen men to speak His Word and minister His Sacraments, that you fish might continually be drawn into the church.

Even today, our Lord feeds His fish with the riches of His Altar. He draws you to Himself, that through His true and literal body and blood, He may dwell in you and you in Him forever. He partook of you by becoming human. And now you partake of Him in the Supper, that you may share in His divine glory. Just as the great fish swallowed up Jonah to save him from death, so also Jesus took you into Himself, swallowing up your sin and death on the cross, and raising you up to a new life on the third day in His bodily resurrection. Jesus is your great fish, as He is pictured on the side wall with the Greek letters, which stand for **“Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior.”** That indeed is what He is, for you.

So let it not be said among you, **“Lord, depart from me. I must stay away from you. You couldn't possibly save a sinner like me.”** Instead, God grant you to say, **“At Your Word, Lord, I forsake all my plans, all my ways of doing things to follow you. At your Word, Lord, I let down all my defenses and trust in Your loving kindness. For You are my light and my salvation.”**

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.