

“Go Fish!”

Earlier this morning we heard about the call story of Isaiah, and momentarily we will read the call story of a couple of the disciples, which centers around going fishing. Fishing can be fun; it can also be a little boring – especially if the fish aren’t biting! When I was a kid, we went fishing a couple of ways. One was the traditional way, with fishing poles, bait, and such, and the other way was with cards.

When I stayed overnight with my grandparents, we always played a round of “Go Fish!” Has anyone else ever played that game? Each player gets five cards, the rest of the deck becomes the draw pile, known as “the ocean.” And then you take turns asking each other if they have any of the cards you need – the object of the game is to get four of a kind and get rid of all your cards first. Our Gospel lesson today reminds me, in a way, of the card game, “Go Fish!” because of a statement which Jesus makes in it. If you have your Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 5:1-11. **Read Luke 5:1-11.**

Our passage today opens with Jesus standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with people crowding around Him and listening to the Word of God (Luke 5:1). The lake of Gennesaret is another name for the Sea of Galilee. Luke is the only Gospel writer who calls it the Lake of Gennesaret. It’s also interesting that Luke states they were “listening to the Word of God.” In John’s Gospel account, Jesus is called the Word-made-flesh. He’s always existed, He was God and was with God from the beginning. They were listening to Jesus. He was teaching them, listening to Him talk. And He sees two boats sitting on the shore. The fishermen were there, washing their nets (verse 2).

Going Deeper

“Jesus got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then He sat down and taught the people from the boat,” (verse 3). Simon apparently owned one of the boats, and he had previously met Jesus back in Luke 4 when Jesus went to Simon’s house to heal his mother-in-law who had a terrible fever. Of course, we know who Simon turned out to be – Simon Peter, the one Jesus said He would build His church upon, who denied Him three times before the rooster crowed in the early hours of Good Friday.

Despite his denial, Peter became a faithful follower of Jesus Christ – and remained so until his martyrdom. In our passage this morning, Jesus climbed into Simon’s boat, asks him to put out a ways from shore so He could be heard by the people, and finish His teaching. From His position in the boat, Jesus could be seen and heard by anyone on the shore and was able to effectively teach them about God. And then something remarkable happens. “He said to Simon, ‘Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch,’” (verse 4).

See, Simon's content to keep the boat close to shore, but Christ tells him to go deeper. How often do we find ourselves content in our situations, reluctant to answer God's call to go deeper? This happens all the time. Back in 2013 or 2014 when I was involved in Certified Lay Ministry Academy, one of the assignments we had was to complete a mission project over the summer. When you think of mission projects, what usually crosses your mind? I'll tell you the first thing I thought of – "I'm going to have to go to Africa or Latin America to feed hungry people."

Mission Projects

I got really stressed out about it. The thing is you don't have to leave the country to do mission projects. You can do them right here. This Souper Bowl nonperishable food drive and raising money for Agape food pantry that we are doing today is a mission project. And going down to the Alpha Center to provide a meal to some of our low income, even homeless neighbors, is a mission project.

Three times a year we go to the Alpha Center and give them a message, letting them know Jesus loves them, by sharing the Scripture – and a meal – with them. And that's what I did for the mission project assignment. It took me out of my comfort zone. I had some ideas – you might even say prejudices – about people who are there regularly. I know other people who have similar views because we've talked about them. Like, "They're involved with drugs, so they blew their money foolishly and now they're homeless." There may be some truth in that, but we are told in Scripture to "speak the truth in love," and there's no love in saying that – only judgment and condemnation.

So, I was reluctant to do the mission project, even after I knew what I was going to do, because I really didn't want to be around "those" people. But you know something? I went and did it – I went deeper – and what a blessing it's been to me! I've gone nearly every time since then when we've had a meal down there, and I love preaching to them. It's good for us to get out of our comfort zones and go into the deep water with Jesus.

Let Down the Nets

The other thing here, is that Jesus tells Simon to "let down the nets for a catch." In other words, "Go fish!" Now, in those days, for whatever reason, they fished during the night. They would haul their fresh-caught fish into shore early in the morning as the sun was coming up and take it to the market to sell. So, fishing in the daytime was highly unusual.

Notice how Simon responds. "Simon answered, 'Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because You say so, I will let down the nets,'" (Luke 5:5). Simon was tired – he'd been up fishing all night. When I was a kid, sometimes Dad and I would go catfishing at night. We'd be out for hours sitting along the bank of one of the inlets around Lake Loramie with a kerosene lantern to give a little light. Honestly, I don't remember catching much of anything – it was mostly just us spending time together.

Some people really like to fish. They can spend all day on a boat, on the bank of a creek, or on the shores of a lake – and they have a great time. You have to be patient to fish, and I’m not really very patient, so always got bored pretty fast with it. Because Jesus told Simon to do it, he does it, even though he’s tired, and doesn’t really expect to catch anything.

The Nets Began to Break

Then a miracle happens. “When they had let down the nets, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break,” (verse 6). They’d been out all night, and hadn’t caught a thing, and suddenly, the nets are filled to the point of bursting. Luke records, “They signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink,” (verse 7). Friends, that’s a lot more fish than Simon, or any of the other guys had ever expected to catch. Jesus, the Lord of Creation, makes great things happen – and shows great kindness to people all the time!

All this overwhelms Simon. “When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, ‘Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!’” (verse 8). You see, Simon Peter, in this moment, recognized that he was in front of the Living God, and he was terribly aware of his own sinfulness and unworthiness to even be in the presence of Jesus. We come to Jesus, so often, when we haven’t been able to catch a break – we often come to Him through some crisis – because we recognize our need for help.

As people who come to Jesus, and decide to follow Him, we also become terribly aware of our own sinfulness and unworthiness. This happens as we grow closer to Him through prayer, through reading the Scriptures, through talking with friends who love and follow Jesus. By accepting what we call God’s justifying grace given to us through Christ’s sacrifice at the cross, we see ever clearer our own need for Jesus to be our Savior, and to make us right with God – to continue to pour out His sanctifying grace on us over the course of our lifespans and make us more and more like Him.

Fishing For People

Simon Peter and his fishing colleagues were in shock and awe over all the fish they had caught – under Jesus’ direction. Luke tells us, “For he [Simon Peter] and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon’s partners,” (verses 9-10a). See these guys knew they were in the presence of Someone unlike any other person they had ever encountered before. All these fish were the catch of a lifetime for these guys.

But the real catch is that they’ve just encountered Jesus – the living Word of God! Luke mentions them by name: Simon, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. These guys would all become apostles – they would become leaders in the ancient church, and all of them would be killed for their faith in Jesus. After all this, Jesus tells Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people,” (verse 10b).

Simon, James, and John – they were professional fishermen. They weren’t specially trained, super religious guys. They weren’t pastors or priests, or anything even remotely spectacular. They were common, ordinary, run-of-the-mill people just

like you and me. They were fishermen. They didn't need to go to college or seminary or have any specialized training to do what they were doing. They caught fish for a living and sold what they caught to people living in the surrounding villages.

Left Everything and Followed

I suppose we might compare them to farmers, food industry workers, or factory workers today. They were ordinary people, living ordinary lives. But Jesus tells them, "From now on you will catch people," and their lives changed in that moment. His call – to fish for people – turned their lives upside down. I mean, look what they did – "They pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed Him," (verse 11). This wasn't the first time these guys had seen Jesus, but from this point on, they would follow Him as His disciples.

When I read this passage, I often wonder if they just left the fish laying there in the nets on the beach, or had their friends and family come along and take care of the fish. We don't know what happened with the fish that day, but we know that these particular guys left everything behind and followed Jesus Christ. Each of them was equipped by God to "Go Fish!" for people. They were called to spread the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, living a perfect life, dying on the cross for the sins of the whole world, and leaving the tomb empty three days later when He physically rose back to life.

The work Jesus gave those disciples, to "Go Fish!" was successful, and the message they shared has become one of the most well-known stories in human history. The story of what Jesus has done for us has been spread by men and women, many of whom were ordinary, common people – like us – equipped by God. One of the commentaries I looked at this week had this to say about this particular passage:

Fish weren't the only catch of the day; Simon and his companions were hooked. Captivated. Called. And that's what miracles are meant to do: they meet us at our point of need, but they do not leave us there. They call us to move from being recipients to be participants, to share in the ways that God pours out Godself for the life of the community and the healing of the world.

When God "catches" us, it's not the end of life, but the beginning for those who have been caught up in the work of God. When we are caught by God, we become "fish out of water," but we find that, impossibly, we breathe even better, live even freer, and become even more whole than we were before. We become like Japanese kintsugi bowls that I've mentioned to you many times before. Those broken bowls that they solder back together with gold soldering. He takes us, broken as we are, and in some beautifully mysterious way, reveals His Spirit moving and acting through these common jars of clay.

Prayer: Loving God, You have called forth disciples and prophets to live and speak Your word. Give us ears to hear, lives to respond, and voices to proclaim the good news of salvation, which we know in our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.