

“Try the other side of the boat”
Luke 5:1-11
Brentwood First Presbyterian
2/4/07
5th Sunday after Epiphany
The Reverend Michael J Magee, MD”

Scene 1 Jesus stands off to the side and observes

You may have bills we cannot pay. Your expenses may exceed your income. But the truth is, even when your nets are full, you might still have an empty life. After you’ve sold the fish in the market and have put a share of the money in the bank, you may still feel an emptiness deeper than empty nets and a yearning more poignant than the desire for economic security. You may have children with problems. You may have health problems. You may be lonely. You may be tired.

The first disciples work all night and catch nothing. But they did not throw their nets on God’s side. They only threw them on their own side of the boat. Not God’s side, their side. Not God’s way, their way.

Scene 2 Jesus sits and teaches

I think today’s scripture is not about catching fish. Instead, I think it is an enacted parable. I think the lesson is not about fish. It is about something else.

Someone once said “Life is like a 10-speed bike. Most of us have gears we never use.” In the movie and book, *The Lion in Winter*, there is a scene where three sons wrestle for the right to succeed King Henry. John tells his mother Eleanor, played by Katherine Hepburn, that his brother Richard has a knife. Listen as she captures messiness of human nature and then offers a better way: “Of course (your brother) has a knife. We all have knives--we are barbarians--we are the origins of war--we breed war. For the love of God," she continues, “can't we love one another--just a little? That's how peace begins. We have such possibilities, my children. We could change the world.”

Jesus of Nazareth gets into the boat with the three defeated men. He sits down and teaches the people from the boat. When he stops teaching, he says to Simon Peter, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets.”

Through Jesus, the Holy Spirit gives us possibilities. Helps us to look at the world in a different way. Jesus is in the business of transformation. I imagine that Jesus in a way tells the disciples two things about letting their nets down again. First, he tells them if what they have tried before does not work, try something different. Like putting their nets on the other side of the boat. Second, he tells them to never give up, because with God’s help, they will catch fish. Scripture says, “By yourselves, you can do nothing. But with God, anything is possible.” Jesus transforms the first disciples from despair to hope, and from fatigue to discipleship. They do not have to do this by themselves. In fact, they

can't. But Jesus tells them God's Spirit is always with them. On Christ the solid rock we stand, all other ground is sinking sand.

Scene 3 Disciples catch fish

Peter fished all night and caught nothing. Jesus asked him to let down his nets again for a catch. It seemed foolish to do so, because Peter had already tried. Then and now, the Lake of Galilee is teeming with sardines, catfish, and tilapia. But they could not find the fish last night. You and I might have said to Jesus, "Been there, done that, got the t-shirt." But that is not what Peter said. He said, "At your word, I will let down the nets." Peter is obedient.

Peter obeys even when he thinks what Jesus tells them to do is ridiculous. Jesus says to throw the nets on the other side of the boat. God's side. Sometimes God's way does not make sense. But it works.

George Frederick Handel is famous for writing the Messiah. But he was not always famous. At one time he was in debt, and full of despair. He had a cerebral hemorrhage and was paralyzed on his right side. For four years he could neither walk nor write. The doctors gave up on him. He wrote several operas, but again he fell into debt. At age 60 he thought his life was finished. Then he was challenged by a friend to write a sacred chorale. He read the Scriptures and decided to work on the Messiah. For 24 days, without eating, he worked to produce the Messiah, which many today consider the greatest chorale ever written. Inspired by God, he reached deep within himself and did what he thought he could never do.

Do you remember when you caught your first fish? I do. I was 10 years old, and my Dad and I took a bamboo pole with a little line on it, a bobber, and some earth worms to a pond. A few minutes after putting the hook and bobber in the water, I felt a jerk and a tug. I was so excited I jerked the pole and bobber out of the water over my head, the half pound catfish flopping in the grass behind me.

But Luke's fish story involves a lot more fish than mine. Can you see the straining fishermen bringing the overloaded nets into the boat? Can you hear the boat creaking with the heavy load? Can you see the fish flipping and flopping so that the boat overflows with fish? What an exciting day to fill the boat with fish!

God's Spirit sometimes asks us to do things that do not make sense. When we throw our nets on the other side of the boat, we do catch fish.

Scene 4 Disciples follow

The first disciples do nothing to deserve Jesus' call to them. Jesus' call is unpredictable and unmerited. Jesus' call to discipleship does not occur in a holy place, but in the midst of daily work. And the first disciples leave all their possessions, all their fish.

Forgive the pun, but there's something "fishy" about this morning's Gospel reading. And I do not mean the miracle of the fish. What seems fishy is Simon Peter's instant conversion from a fisher of fish to a fisher of people. How can a person make such a life change with so little due process?

This story is wonderful. Simon Peter and his business partners are drying their nets after a frustrating night of bad fishing. Jesus shows up and asks Simon Peter to row him off shore so he can better teach the pressing crowd. At the end of his talk, Jesus tells Simon Peter to let down his net in the deep waters. The result is such a catch of fish that both his boat and his partners' boat begin to sink!

Simon Peter's reaction to the catch is not joy but fear: "Depart from me, O Lord," Peter cries out, "for I am a sinful man." Jesus tells him, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will be catching people." And, just like that, Simon and the others leave everything to follow Jesus!

Sound fishy to you? Too quick a decision? Simon did none of the normal work we associate with making a career change. He never took the Myers-Briggs test or the Minnesota Multi-Phasic Inventory. He didn't consult his accountant or his family. He never asked about salary or vacation. He didn't inquire about perks, profit-sharing or pension plans. He didn't even pray! He just left everything and followed Jesus. We sense that something else was going on with Peter!

To learn what was going on in Simon's life, we look in the fourth chapter of Luke where Jesus enters the small Galilean village of Capernaum. Jesus stays at the home of Simon Peter's mother-in-law. Since this house would later become the headquarters for Jesus and his disciples, it's possible that Peter and his wife lived there with her mother. Now, there's nothing wrong in our current era with a man and his spouse living with her mother, but, in the "man's world" of the Bible, living with your mother-in-law is not a good thing. This is further hinted at in that Simon didn't own his own business. Instead he worked with the sons of Zebedee, James and John.

According to Luke's Gospel, things were not going well in the mother-in-law's house. On the day that Jesus stays with them his mother-in-law is seriously ill.

Now, as we move into the heart of our lesson for the day, we see Simon Peter's bad week becoming worse! He was living with his mother-in-law, working for "The Sons of Zebedee Fishing Company," and now he strikes out by not catching a single fish in a night of intense labor. To Simon Peter fishing was not a way to pass a pleasant summer evening; it was his livelihood. In Galilee, fish was eaten, processed, salted, dried, pickled, and exported.

Simon had not caught any fish and Luke uses the Greek word *Kopos*, to describe his feeling. *Kopos* means toil and weariness, as if one had been beaten. It was not for lack of effort that Simon had failed. He'd fished all night long. He had nothing to show.

It is in failure that Jesus meets Simon Peter. He lives with a sick mother-in-law. He works for somebody else. And he experienced a dreadful night on the job. Simon Peter was soul searching, struggling with his identity.

We all fail at times. There are nights when the fish just don't bite. That's why we need to hear the rest of this morning's reading. Peter may have failed in one day of fishing. That did not mean he was a failure in life. There is a difference in saying, "I have failed," and "I am a failure." One of the best things a coach can say to a youth baseball team after they lose a game, is "Do you know the difference between a loser and a winner? A loser, when she is knocked down, stays down. A winner gets back up."

Good things did happen. Simon Peter caught so many fish he nearly sank the entire fleet of Zebedee and Sons Fishing! Simon could have his fish fresh, processed, salted, dried, pickled or exported! This was the most successful day in Simon Peter's life and he walked away from it all! That's what blows us away. When Jesus told Simon Peter he had other plans for him, he walked away from the only livelihood he knew. Simon Peter had come to that critical point in every person's life when he realizes that everything material he ever wanted just isn't enough! Simon's hunger is not for fish. His hunger is for God! And he collapses at Jesus' feet.

Simon Peter walked away from the biggest day in his life. I suppose we could say that God had bigger fish for him to fry! Jesus offered Simon Peter, as he offers us, a better direction in life.

I would like to tell you a story about a group of people who called themselves fishermen. It is a story I got off the internet last night.

"These folk lived in an area where there were many fish--waters all around them. In fact, the whole area was surrounded by streams and lakes and rivers just filled with fish. And the fish were hungry.

"Week after week, month after month, year after year, these people who called themselves fishermen held meetings and talked about their call to be fishermen, the abundance of fish, and they passed along all the latest innovations in fishing. Year after year, they carefully defined what fishing was all about, defended fishing as a noble occupation, and declared that fishing is always the primary task of fishermen.

"They constantly searched for new and better methods of fishing, and for new and better definitions of fishing. They loved such slogans as "Fishing is the task of every fisherman." They sponsored special meetings known as "Fisherman's Campaigns." They went on nationwide and even worldwide tours to discuss fishing and promote fishing and hear about all the new developments and technological advances in fishing and new ways of presenting the bait to the fish that made it more attractive and alluring.

“They built large, beautiful buildings called “Fishing Headquarters,” and selected some of their best fishermen to staff it. They appealed to everyone to become fishermen. There was only one thing they did not do. They didn’t fish. Ever.

“In addition to organizing and holding regularly scheduled meetings, they organized a board to send out fishermen to other parts of the world where the fish were plentiful. The board appointed various committees and held many meetings to talk about fishing, defend fishing, and develop new strategies for fishing. But the committee members never went fishing.

“Large, expensive training centers were built for the purpose of teaching fishermen how to fish. They offered courses on the needs of fish, the nature of fish, dealing with the different generations of fish, the psychological makeup of fish, and how to approach and feed fish. The professors all had degrees in fishology, but none of them ever went fishing. They only taught fishing. After completing the course of study, graduates were given their fishing license and sent out to do full-time fishing, some to distant waters that were filled with fish.

“Many who felt the call to be fishermen responded. They were commissioned and sent to fish. But like the fishermen back home, they could talk for hours about the need for fishing, and they knew all the current developments in fishing, but they didn’t fish. They were too busy doing other things. Some said they really wanted to fish, but since they just didn’t have time, they would just furnish fishing equipment for others. Others felt that their job was to establish a good relationship with the fish so that the fish would be more receptive to the fishermen.

“After one stirring meeting on “The Necessity for Fishing,” one young fellow left the meeting and actually went fishing! He reported the next day that he caught two outstanding fish. He was honored for his excellent catch, and immediately a nationwide tour was scheduled so that he could visit all the big meetings and tell how he did it. So he quit fishing at once in order to have time to tell others about the experience. He was also placed on the Fishermen’s General Board, which consumed quite a bit of his time, so much so that he had no time at all for fishing.

“Now it’s true that many of the fishermen made personal sacrifices and put up with all kinds of difficulties. Some lived near the water and had to bear the smell of dead and decaying fish every day. They were ridiculed by some who made fun of their fishermen’s clubs and for the fact that, though they claimed to be fishermen, they never fished. They wondered about those people who felt that attending weekly meetings to talk about fishing was a waste of time. After all, were they not following the Master, who said, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people?’”

“Imagine how hurt they were when one day someone suggested that those who don’t catch fish were not really fishermen, no matter how much they claimed to be. But they understood the criticism. After all, can people who never catch any fish really claim to be fishermen? Are you following if you’re not fishing?”

Most of our witnessing is likely to happen in passing moments of conversation--those occasions when we show, in relatively minor ways, who we are and to whom we belong. It would be easy to say, "I read something this morning." Instead, with no attempt at being pious, you could simply introduce one word: "In my devotional reading this morning." It is not a major soul-winning engagement. It is, however, a true sowing of seed. By a word, you open the door for further conversation.

Perhaps our greatest problem in becoming Jesus' fishermen and women is that we do not grasp the opportunities that come to us. We think we must say something dramatic and far-reaching. We fail to say the small, immediate and potentially significant thing. To put it in the language of our lesson for the day, most of us really don't act as if we even have a call to "fish." We're out in the waters of human need every day, but we don't seem to know it.

The issue is not that we should become more aggressive about sharing our faith. It is that we should be more sensitive to the needs of the world around us, and more sensitive to the subtle prodding of the Holy Spirit. The two sensitivities are intertwined. To be sensitive to the Holy Spirit must mean that we will be more sensitive to people and their pain. To be more sensitive to people ought to make us more open to God and God's purposes.

Conclusion

Let me tell you another story. A story about a salesman. He seemed to be a loser. His grammar was atrocious. When the overall whole company sales were down, the Chairman of the Board posted the following e-mail: "Attention all sales personnel: We will have an important meeting March 1 at 10:00 a.m. and the subject will be 'How to sell our product.' Be there!" The salesman with the bad grammar was on the road when he received the announcement. He responded to the chairman with this e-mail: "I ain't got time to come to no meeting. I just sold 2,000 appliances to my 13th customer and I gotta get going to ketch number 14, where I 'spect to sale at least 4,000 more." Days later, the new Chairman of the Board sent out a new e-mail to all the sales people: "Fergit the meeting called fer Mar. one. Git out there and ketch the next customer and "spect to make a big sells."

To God be the Glory, Alleluiah, and Amen.