

2-6-21 Fifth Sunday After Epiphany

Pastor Priewe

Text: Luke 5:1-11.

Theme: Fish Who've Been Caught Fish for People

The renowned radio television and radio evangelist, Billy Graham, not a man from our church body, but a man who preached to millions of people, was jealous of our comparatively small little WELS Christian education system. He once sat in a WELS church just like this one, down near the Seminary in Mequon. He was attending the confirmation service of his grandchild who was being confirmed that day. As he sat and listened to the customary examination, that part where the pastor asks the confirmands questions and they answered with the truths of their faith, Billy Graham was floored by the vast amount of Bible learning, and especially the foundational understanding of grace that each of these students possessed.

He couldn't believe it based on what he knew of his own denomination and that day he came to recognize what our church body has long treasured as a crown jewel, our Lutheran education system of pre-school, and elementary school and Sunday school and Vacation Bible school and Catechism instruction, Lutheran High School and our ministry preparation schools. That's the blessing from God we've been giving thanks for this past week at Mount Olive during Christian Education week. Our children learn the stories and truths of our faith from little on as they continue to grow in faith during a life of discipleship.

Today in our Gospel lesson from Luke 5, we're revisiting the day **"Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, [and] the people were crowding around him listening to the word of God."** (Luke 5:1) It was that same day Jesus called his first disciples to be disciples. As a boy who was blessed by 22 years in our Christian Ed. System from preschool through the end of seminary, I can't tell you how many times I might have learned and relearned this story over the years. And then one day, right after I graduated, I found myself walking with my shoes and socks on in the Sea of Galilee. I had climbed down the bank of the Sea of Galilee, the Lake of Gennesaret, near the city of Capernaum, and was dipping my feet into the water where so many Sunday School Bible stories happened.

On that particular day, my Father-in-law who was leading the tour led us up this little stream, with sharp rocks on the bottom, through the cattails to a place where there was a spring pouring out of the bank of the shore into the Sea. It was as good a place as any that fishermen might have been washing their nets in the running water from the spring. Regardless of if it was that exact place, it was somewhere on this shore and in this water that the Gospel Lesson happened. We heard, **"Jesus saw at the waters edge two boats, left there by the fisherman, who were washing their nets."** (5:2)

Standing in that water, there were shivers running down my spine and tears welling up in my eyes 2000 years after the fact. Not because I was on some sort of holy pilgrimage in the holy land, nor because the water in Galilee has some sort of mystical powers. I couldn't help but tremble because I was seeing the place where the words of the story I had heard since I was a boy happened for the first time. I was standing in the place where sinners found themselves in the presence of a hidden and holy God, and God did not send them away. In fact, he was there to draw near to them, and to uncover his identity in a way that wouldn't vaporize them with his glory.

In those moments, I could only begin to imagine what Peter was in for that day as the maker of heaven and earth stepped to his boat unbeknownst to him. But as Jesus started to teach the people on the shore from a little ways out in the boat, there was just something about what he was saying that commanded authority.

So much so, that Peter, a fisherman by trade, and tired from a frustrating night's work of not catching a thing, was willing to take fishing advice from a carpenter. Peter utters the words of a budding faith, **"Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything, but**

because You say so, I will let down the nets.” (5:5) So Peter goes along with it and puts down the nets out in the deep water in the light of day. Any sensible fisherman on his hometown lake would know that’s not the place or the time to catch fish, but there was something about Jesus that was worth the experiment.

And wouldn’t you know it, a gigantic school of fish appears out of nowhere and hops into the net, so full it’s going to take the boat under, that boat and another one that came to the rescue. Now these aren’t giant boats by any means, (the slide shows the remains of a 1st century fishing boat that washed up onto the sea of Galilee). But this isn’t beginners’ luck either. Peter knows this isn’t natural. He knows he’s in the presence of an unexplainable power and authority who just called his unlikely shot and it brings him to his knees, or rather to Jesus’ knees.

“Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man.” Peter hit that one on the head. That’s exactly the conclusion the law written on our hearts should bring us to. We don’t deserve to be anywhere near the God we’ve offended with lives of daily rebellion against him. He should get as far away from us as possible and simply abandon us to the lives we’ve chosen apart from him.

At this point, you might feel an objection brewing in your gut. “Sheesh, pastor, I don’t know if I’m that bad. I know I’ve made some mistakes but do I deserve to be abandoned forever? Think of it this way. Imagine you order up a nice milkshake, your favorite kind. You’ve been excited the whole drive over to dive into this ice cream treat. You take your first slurp through the straw, it’s so good, you close your eyes to enjoy its bliss, and when you open your eyes and look down, there’s a dead fly in your milkshake! Agghhhh! Your stomach turns over! Immediate disgust, repulsion, rejection. It must be sent away!

Nobody would look and say, “Ehh, a little protein doesn’t hurt. I’ll just keep drinking from the bottom and not the top.” No, it’s ruined. It must go. And that’s just because of one fly. Imagine what a lifetime of flies added to our milkshake looks like to a Holy God. Disgust, disappointment, disapproval. We deserve to be abandoned. The sensible and fitting thing for the hidden and holy God in that boat to say to a sinful man is, “Peter, you’re right. I’m outta here!” or “Get away from me.” And to us the fitting thing for him to say is, **“Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire.”**

But the thing about our Holy God is that he forsakes being fair and sensible for the sake of being gracious and radical. And in his radical grace, he is there in the boat letting a sinner fall on his holy knees. And he doesn’t leave or send him away! You can see Jesus in that moment lifting up Peter’s face, looking in his eyes, knowing everything he had ever done or would ever do. And he says these words, **“Don’t be afraid.”** In the past nobody could see the face of God and live, but Peter looked into the face of Jesus and found pardon and peace, forgiveness and grace, and something even more—purpose, mission, calling.

Jesus wasn’t finished. **“Don’t be afraid,” he said, “from now on you will fish for people.”** “Me, Lord? I’m a sinful man!” Unqualified beyond belief! Peter was really having the same reaction Isaiah had in his vision of being in the presence of the Holy God, **“Woe to me! I am ruined.”** I’m sinful and so are my people. But the angel flies to Isaiah and touches his lips with the burning coal, and says, **“Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”** (Isaiah 6:7) Then the LORD asked him, **“Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”** **“Here am I. Send me!”** Isaiah said.

In these two calling scenes we see the forgiveness that’s embedded in the call that God gives to go for him, and to fish for people. Who is a God like ours? Who pardons our sins, delights to show mercy, and then calls us to service as messengers. He makes us part of his team.

Not disgust, disappointment, and disapproval, but pardon, delight, and purpose. *The least qualified are the first sent.*

So what does it mean when Jesus says “fish for people?” For Peter, Jesus wasn’t really changing his occupation. He was still going to be a fisherman, just not for fish, instead for people, for sinners swimming to the bottom of the abyss. For Peter and the other fisherman that day, he was calling them to be full time disciple and full-time fishers of men.

When Peter, James and John heard the call of Jesus, they left everything, their boats and their business, and all the money they could have made from those fish right on the shore, and they followed him. That’s what happens to sinners who recognize that Jesus does not condemn us or send us away, but draws us to himself. It makes us want to go with him to the ends of the earth and do the work he calls us to do.

The cool part for you is that being a full-time disciple of Jesus and a full time fisher of men does not require you to change careers and become a full time church worker. Don’t get me wrong. I love what I do. Being a pastor is an amazing job, but it’s certainly not the only way to fish for people. You can fish for people while you are fishing for walleye, or managing investments, or watching children, or preparing food. In fact, you might have an advantage. There’s tons of fish out there in the seas where you live and work and play.

But isn’t that where its tempting to think we can be only part-time disciples, disciples who can take long vacations from being disciples, or better yet, weekend warriors just putting in a shift on Sunday. It’s tempting to put our calling as disciples and fishers into a nice little box that we can take out when we want it and put back when we are tired or busy or just don’t feel like it.

I mentioned at the beginning Billy Graham’s compliment to our church body and our Christian Education system. It’s also worth mentioning a perhaps fitting observation he made. He called Lutherans “the sleeping giant”. They know so much about grace, but they say so little about their faith. I think we might now know what he means, if we’re being honest.

There is plenty of room for everyone of us to grow in being fishers for people, in each of us thinking about and being active in casting out lines to bring people in. And humanly speaking, when people are the hook, when they’re interested and have come to learn more or have even come to worship, we want to real them in and not let go. We want them to be part of our Family Growing in Christ!

Now I don’t know about you, but there’s a competitive streak in me that says, “I don’t want to be known as the sleeping giant church body, who knows so much and shares so little.” I don’t think Jesus wants that either. He made us fishers for people, and because he says so, we’re going to keep learning how to let down the nets. That’s the reason we’re hosting this workshop called Everyone Outreach. To think about fishing for people, and learn something about what distracts or holds us back, to address it, and come out with “I will” statements to wake up the sleeping giant. Unqualified fish like you and me who by God’s grace have been caught, are the ones sent to fish for people. It’s what Jesus calls us to do! Amen.