

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

February 9, 2025 (5th Sunday after Epiphany, Year C)
Luke 5:1-11

A fishing story.

A man was stopped by a game-warden in a State Park with his live well full of fish. The game warden asked, "Do you have a license to catch those fish?"

The man replied, "No, sir. These are my PET fish."

"Pet fish?" the game warden wondered.

"Yes, sir. Every night I take these here fish down to the lake and let them swim around for a while. I whistle and they jump right back into the boat, and I take 'em home."

"That's a bunch of nonsense! Fish can't do that!"

The man looked at the game warden for a moment, and said, "Here, I'll show you. It really works."

The game warden was curious. "OK. I've GOT to see this!"

The man put all the fish into the water and stood and waited. After several minutes, the game warden turned to the man and said, "Well?"

"Well, what?" the man responded.

"When are you going to call them back?"

"Call who back?" the man said.

"The FISH!"

"What fish?" said the man innocently.

We have in our Gospel today a fish tale, but this one reads more like a parable. Simon hadn't caught any fish either, but the way the story PLAYS OUT is meant to TEACH us something.

Our first CLUE of that is that this story is recorded in the Gospel at ALL. This has always struck me. When Matthew and Mark tell this story, THEY DON'T INCLUDE the miracle. In fact, Luke is the ONLY Gospel that has this miracle. When Matthew and Mark tell the story, it's a LOT SHORTER. Jesus is just walking along the beach, and sees these fishermen, and calls, "Follow Me," and they drop everything and FOLLOW him.

That's it — short and sweet. The MIRACLE ISN'T THERE.

Did Matthew and Mark forget it? Probably not. It's more like, for THEM, the miracle wasn't IMPORTANT; something ELSE was: it was Jesus' CALLING. That's the ONE thing ALL THREE gospel writers agreed on: Jesus said, "From now on you'll be fishing for people." His Word is so POWERFUL that they're TRANSFORMED. JESUS SPEAKS AND SUDDENLY, fishermen become disciples. Even THIS version of the story has a nod to that, when Simon protests, but relents: "At your WORD, I will let down the nets."

The DIFFERENCE between this version and Matthew and Mark's is that when LUKE TELLS this story, he doesn't tell it from JESUS' perspective; he tells it from SIMON'S point of view.

And Simon KNEW there was a lot MORE to this story. This encounter on the beach was NOT the FIRST time he had MET Jesus. A few days before, Simon had HEARD about Jesus and asked him to come to his HOME and HEAL his mother-in-law. Jesus DID that, and MUCH MORE, spending the REST of the day healing people from the town at SIMON'S HOUSE. Simon had SEEN things. He'd HEARD things.

So, when Simon saw Jesus with SUCH a crowd pressing in on him that they were PUSHING him into the lake, Simon wasn't surprised. But EVERYTHING that happened NEXT, WAS a surprise. Jesus got INTO HIS BOAT and asked him to put out a little way from the shore.

This is where the story BECOMES A LIVING PARABLE. The CROWD is STILL the crowd TODAY. They're just sampling Jesus. Checking him out to see what he's all about. They'll listen as long as it's EASY. THEY'LL stay on the LAND, thank you very much.

The FISHERMEN ACT. They go out onto the lake.

The beach was SAFE, but the WATER, EVEN just a little way from shore, was a little MORE RISKY.

One of the few creatures on earth that can out-jump a basketball player or a high jumper is the Impala. This is an African deer with a supercharged spring. It has a vertical leap of over 10 feet and can broad-jump over 30 feet. You would think that the zoos of the world would find it IMPOSSIBLE to keep such an animal enclosed. Not so! It's rather EASY. Because the experts have discovered something ABOUT the Impala. It will NOT JUMP unless it can SEE WHERE it's going to land. Therefore, a solid wall of even 6 feet tall is sufficient for an enclosure.

Lots of CHRISTIANS have the IMPALA PROBLEM. They won't take a leap of FAITH unless they have all the answers in ADVANCE about where the leap will TAKE them. But God is looking for some BOLD believers who, even in the face of the unknown, will leap when the Spirit says leap, and fly when the Spirit says fly.

In our Bible book study this week, we talked a little about a weekend experience called Via de Cristo or Christille, that many of them had attended years ago. It was a life-changing experience for everyone I have ever talked to that went to it, but it IS NO MORE. Our group of attendees thinks it's because people were not told what would HAPPEN at the event, just to TRUST THE PROCESS and follow the SPIRIT. The event doesn't happen anymore because people stopped going. They couldn't handle NOT KNOWING the schedule.

So, why did the fishermen GO? They were tired. They'd been OUT ALL NIGHT WORKING, and they were DONE for the day, cleaning their nets. They were just about HOME. Why go back out on the water at ALL?

They got back into their boat, because JESUS ASKED them too. And they knew ENOUGH ABOUT Jesus to know that he was WORTH THE RISK.

The CROWDS could only go as far as their earlier amazement, or the opposition of the Pharisees and teachers, but the FISHERMEN RESPONDED to Jesus and OBEYED.

If you haven't figured it out already, the fishermen are us, the members of the CHURCH, the ones who do the WORK. Jesus calls us to act, and we RESPOND.

But Jesus isn't DONE with us. He calls us to "put out into the DEEP water." To go deeper. The DEEP water is dangerous and unknown. It's risky. We don't know what will happen to us out there.

And Simon knew BETTER. He was a professional fisherman and he'd tried and FAILED to find any fish ALL NIGHT. He was a defeated man. The fishermen COULD have said, "We tried that BEFORE and it didn't work. It's NOT WORTH it." They could have said that, and NO ONE would have disagreed with them.

George Frederick Handel was dogged with misfortune. He had debt upon debt, despair upon 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 in debt. At age 60 he thought his life was finished.

Then he was challenged by a friend to write a sacred oratorio. He read the Scriptures and decided to work on one. For 24 days, he worked fanatically to produce his piece, which many today consider the greatest oratorio ever written – the Messiah.

The prospects of something GREAT happening can look grim. Simon had fished all night and caught nothing. Jesus asked him to let down his nets for a catch. It SEEMED FOOLISH, because Simon knew BETTER, that there WERE NO fish to CATCH. "But at your word," he said, "I will let down the nets."

This is what it means to be a COMMITTED Christian. Maturing Christians are willing to seek DEEPER ANSWERS to the questions, to risk trying again, or to try something new, to GO where he CALLS us to go.

But Jesus STILL isn't done with us. He calls us to be his DISCIPLES. Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

A young pastor from Zimbabwe once wrote: "I'm a part of the fellowship of the unashamed. I have the Holy Spirit power. The die has been cast. I have stepped over the line. I'm a disciple of his. I won't look back, let up, slow down, back away, or be still. My past is redeemed, my present makes sense, my future is secure. I'm finished and done with low living, sight walking, smooth knees, colorless dreams, tamed visions, worldly talking, cheap giving and dwarfed goals. I no longer need preeminence, prosperity, position, promotions, plaudits or popularity. I don't HAVE to be first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded or rewarded. I now live by FAITH, lean into his presence, walk in patience, am uplifted by prayer, and I LABOR WITH POWER."

Woo! You see, when you've experienced Jesus' power on the lake, you come back a changed person. When you've gone into the DEEP water with JESUS, when you respond to his Word, you don't come back to the shore the same. You come back a DISCIPLE.

Jesus is calling in YOUR lives too, calling you to go DEEPER. When you were baptized, Christ was calling you. When you were called to FAITH in God, Christ was calling you. When you LIVE OUT your baptisms in the world, when you SERVE OTHERS, Christ IS calling you. And here today, in THIS CHURCH, Christ is CALLING you: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people. Follow ME." Amen.