

C Lectionary 5 2.6.22

Luke 5:1-11

Focus Statement: Jesus never gives up on us or on the world.

There's a poem by Mary Oliver that starts, "You do not have to be good. / You do not have to walk on your knees / for a hundred miles through the desert repenting. / You only have to let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves." That line, that poem, has been in my head this week as I reflected on our Gospel text for this morning.

Our text starts out this morning with Jesus standing on the shore of the lake of Gennesaret, with "a crowd pressing in on him to hear the word of God." The lake of Gennesaret, to orient us, is another name for the Sea of Galilee. Like so many places, what this place is called depends on who's doing the calling. Most often in scripture it is referred to as the Sea of Galilee. Luke called it the lake of Gennesaret, connecting it to the fertile Gennesaret Plains to the west. You may also hear it referred to as the Sea of Tiberias, a nod to the city of Tiberias, named in honor of the second Roman emperor.

And the crowd is the same crowd who had been gathering around him since the debacle at the synagogue in Nazareth. The Nazarenes might have been turned off by his words, but like we read two weeks ago, most people were not. "All the surrounding countryside" was full of positive reports of his great teachings and miraculous healings and were flocking to Jesus to learn from him. [Pause.] Flocking, see what I did there. Snuck in a little sheep pun to foreshadow all the sheep/shepherd imagery that will come later.

But this passage isn't about sheep. This passage is about another incredibly prevalent first century Palestinian industry, fishing. Fish was, and in some places still is, king in the region around the Sea of Galilee. One of the commentaries I read this week described how people ate fish fresh, processed, salted, dried, pickled, you name it, and then went on in great detail to describe the various types of fish that flourish in the Sea of Galilee, and then the types of nets used to catch each of the types of fish. If you watched the Facebook Bible chat this week, you're really lucky it was a snow day and I worked from home, because I accidentally left those notes in the office and had to take a different direction, saving you from a biology lecture on "Fish of the Galilee." But anyway, fish was king, and these men, Simon, James, and John, were fishermen. Masters of the craft of fishing.

So when, after delivering this powerful message on the good news of the kingdom of God, when Jesus turned to Simon and said, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch," even in the brevity of the passage, you can hear the exhaustion in Simon's response. "Master, we have worked all night long and caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." In Simon, soon to be Peter, one of the commentaries I read this week pointed out, we see a familiar experience: "we've already tried that, and it didn't work." We've already tried that, and it didn't work, Associate Professor Cameron B. R. Howard pointed out, is the rock of fatalism on which many church committees are built. And to be fair, Simon was the expert on the task at hand. I mean, sure, Jesus could preach a good sermon, and the miraculous healing thing was pretty impressive. But this is fishing! This is Simon's bread and butter, his lifeblood. They're in his boat, after all. Nothing in all of Simon's years of fishing have led him to believe that letting out the net another time, this

time in deep water, is going to produce some dramatically different result than the first time. If the fish aren't biting that day, the fish aren't biting. It is what it is.

But that day, it was different. That day, in that moment, with Jesus in the boat, "they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break." So they called their buddies over, and they "filled both boats, so that they began to sink." And here Simon was like, what in the world is going on. And he dropped to the ground at Jesus' knees, which is pretty impressive because remember, he was still in a boat that is full of fish to the point of sinking. Was he laying on fish? Did he drop to Jesus' knees because Jesus up to his knees in fish? But so he dropped to Jesus' knees and declared, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" And again, we're in a boat here, so not far for Jesus to go, but you get the point being made.

But Jesus didn't go anywhere, wouldn't have if he could have. Instead, Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." From now on, you will be catching people. One of the many things I love about what Jesus did here is he called Simon out of what Simon already knew, who Simon already was. Simon was a fisherman, Jesus called him to fish. Fish in a totally new and different way and for a completely different catch, but fish nonetheless.

One of the messages in this calling of the disciples is Jesus calls people doing what they're doing and invites them to keep doing it, in new and different ways. There are times for radical reorientations of direction or purpose, there are certainly plenty of examples in that

in scripture. But there are also times when we are called to be alert to this smallest change, the tiniest shift, where letting down our nets in the vast unknown of the deep water will ignite possibility we couldn't have imagined. Where the persistence of trying again, and again, and again, over a thing that hasn't worked, will finally wear away the path enough, so that things will click into place and the kingdom will be revealed.

This passage is a tricky one to preach friends, because we don't all get to experience a massive catch like Simon. We don't often get the clear voice of Jesus declare to us, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." Instead, we often get the small miracles, that are no less amazing, but much much easier to miss. The Co-op member who finds their way back, after a long hard time away. The middle school kid who sits in the lounge for an hour after school, because they locked themselves out and know this is a safe space to wait for someone's grandma to come home and let them in. Over eight-thousand dollars given for much needed maintenance, from the softest ask ever. The fact that in December we once again passed a deficit budget, like we did last year, like we have every year I've been here, and the annual report we're going to look at after worship today shows us once again finishing the year to the good. Barely to the good, with the help of gifts and grants we did not expect, but still to the good. Our budget is not sinking any boats with its abundance, but clearly the Holy Spirit is doing something in this place, for there's no other explanation for how it just keeps working out.

Calls, and miracles come in all shapes and sizes, and take all forms. "You do not have to be good. / You do not have to walk on your knees / for a hundred miles through the desert

repenting. / You only have to let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves.” Simon loved fishing, Jesus called him to fish. Isaiah was by his own declaration a man of unclean lips, yet God touched those lips and sent him to be a prophet. Paul said of himself, “For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle,” yet it is his writing we read every week, because “by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.”

Love what you love, dear people of God. Be who you are. Because in what you are, in what you love, God is calling you. Thanks be to God. Amen.