

*Fifth Sunday after Epiphany*

February 10, 2019

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Luke. (Luke 5: 1-11)

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

In 1986, there was a drought around Galilee, the sea of Galilee – the lake of Gennesaret, as it is put in this reading – and the level went down. And along the shore there, two brothers found the remains of a fishing boat. When that fishing boat was raised, very carefully by the archeologists, they discovered that the boat was of the age of Peter's boat. It carbon-dated to somewhere between 50 BC and 50 AD. Now, probably it wasn't Peter's boat, but it was a really good example of the fishing boats of that era. The boat itself was twenty-seven feet long. And I want to give you an example of that.

Ray, would you stand right there. Doug, would you stand right there. It was twenty-seven feet long, and it was seven and a half feet wide. And, Russ, can you come up a pew and stand right there.

Okay. So it was twenty-seven feet long and seven and a half feet wide, four and a half feet deep. That's a lot of fish. Jesus fills this thing with fish. That is a lot of fish. But I won't start there. I'll come back to that. I'll let you guys sit down. Thanks.

I want to start on the lakeshore. Capernaum, the town where Jesus lived, was really made up of a lot of one or two-room houses with courtyards, and they were all pressed up right against each other. If you wanted to gather with people, or you wanted the kids to have a place to run, you went to the lakeshore. The lakeshore was where everybody was. When the fishermen came in with their catch, they laid it out on the lakeshore, to sell it. If somebody had extra zucchini from their garden, or a few extra eggs from the chickens that morning, they would bring it out to the lakeshore. Kind of like a farmers' market along the lake shore.

It is also where Rabbi Jesus would come and visit with people. Jesus lived in Capernaum. That was kind of his base of operation. And he would go out to the lakeshore for healing, or teaching, or talking to people about what's going on in the town or in the nation. Jesus worked with real people, and he talked with them about real issues. It's how he preached. It's how he healed. It's how he taught.

Today he was teaching. First on the shore. And then, when too many people got onto the shore, he stepped into one of the boats. When Jesus teaches, it is almost always about the reign of God, about what the world could be in God's good care. Some people call that "the kingdom of God." Some people call it "God's dream." Some people call it "the reign of God." Regardless of what you call it, what it is is a different way of being in the world.

We belong to God, and we belong to each other. Peace and reconciliation are possible. It's possible for everybody to have enough to live on. It's possible that everyone can be seen and valued. And, yes, even then there were people that were like, "Nah, this will never happen." There was resistance even then. But it is God who is slowly, continually, bringing this reign into being. Bringing these dreams into reality. That day on the lakeshore, Jesus was talking about that way of living. What it looks like, how we can do it.

When we gather, we do the same thing. We try to imagine another way of living that is not centered in consumerism, or military force, or based in power, or based in exclusion. We try to imagine what it would look like to work with others, to forgive, to share in small and large ways. And, yes, I know there will always be resistance to such a dream. You could get laughed out of the lunchroom at school for talking about how everyone is beautiful and valued. You could get in trouble about bringing up ethical issues at work. You could find yourself unpopular if you asked your friends to watch their language when it comes to racial or sexual references. So many problems. So much darkness. So much pain. How can such a world emerge? We long for it. We work for it. We hope for it. But sometimes you have to wonder if we will ever get to the point where we can say, "We belong to God and we belong to each other, in peace, in reconciliation, in joy."

We come every Sunday to remind each other it is true, it is coming, this thing that Jesus taught about on the lakeshore.

And then, after Jesus talked about this reign of God, Jesus asked Peter and his friends to go deep. He asked them not to just imagine a new reality, but to step into it, see what it looks like. *“Put out into the deep water,”* Jesus says, *“and let down your nets for a catch.”*

Peter is a doubter. I love that Peter resists this trying it out, this going deep, because so do we. We are practical, and careful, and busy. And like Peter. Peter says to Jesus, “It’s not like we haven’t been fishing all night, Jesus. And it’s not like we don’t know what we’re doing. It’s not like we haven’t come from generations of fishermen who have fished this very lake. But if you, Rabbi Jesus, new in town, think you know better, well, we’ll do it.” Even Peter thinks it’s hard to step into this new reality.

So what makes him go? What makes any of us step up and follow Jesus? Curiosity? Hope? The urging of the Spirit? Jesus is constantly calling us into God’s kingdom, constantly pointing us to try new ways of living together. All the time. When we say no, he still doesn’t give up. He tries something else.

Saint Augustine once said,

*“Our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”*

What if we were open to the urging of the Spirit? What if we said, “I’m going to try one thing this week to live in those dreams of God?”

Peter does say yes, and they put out their nets. And what happens next is a whole lot of fish. Twenty-seven feet, by seven and a half feet, by four and a half feet deep, of fish. And that’s a lot of fish, especially when what they fish in that lake is tilapia, you know, little fish.

When Peter stepped into this new reality and tries to live in God’s reign, when Peter listens to Jesus, he discovers two things. First of all, obviously, is abundance. A lot of fish. Even after the government, who owns the lake and the fish in it, even after the government takes their forty percent cut, even after the middlemen take their cut for processing the fish, because two miles down the road in Magdala, there was a fish-processing plant where they salted and preserved fish, even after those folks took their cut, there was still plenty to eat and plenty to sell. This was such a gift of abundance for the whole community.

God provides. God makes a way. God makes a way for the whole village to share in abundance. That’s one thing.

The other thing is that God provides through the work of real people. God leads us into deep waters, sends us out to use our skills, and creates miracles out of us all the time.

Somebody had to row the boat. Somebody had to haul the nets. With their work and God's abundance, there was plenty for everyone. They couldn't do it on their own. We can't do it on our own. But God will work through us as we work.

Another Augustine quote:

*"Without God, we cannot. Without us, God will not."*

If we are open to it, God will work miracles through us.

So we started on the lakeshore, talking about God's reign, learning about God's reign. Then we went deep to experience God's reign. And then, then we find Peter on his face saying, "I am a sinful man." He didn't stand by this. The power of God, the goodness of God, the abundance that he is in the midst of, it's too good.

Have you ever just looked at your family and been overwhelmed by the beauty of these people being together? Have you ever been outside on a glorious day and just have tears come to your eyes over how amazing life is?

Peter is scared by it. Can he trust God that much all the time? Can he change the way he sees the world and other people? What if this is true? What if God really is leading us to a better world? What if God really wants to work through us? Who, me? It's scary. It is listening to God. Depending on God. Changing the way I do things. Risking. It's hard and scary.

Can we really be God's people in the world? Can we support each other, challenge each other, teach each other to go deeper? Can we together trust in God's guidance? Can we show this whole community what it looks like to live in God's abundance? I think we can. I think we do.

Stop by here on the next snow day and watch the kids, safe and warm, having a ball here, while their parents have the opportunity to go to work. Stop by here some day after a funeral and see the abundance and hospitality given by volunteers, who don't even know the family who is grieving. Go with some of our members to visit the shut-ins, to feed the homeless, to go speak or learn at the Capitol. Talk with people who are trying to make their workplaces more welcoming or more caring. Walk into homes where love and forgiveness and responsibility and faith are shared and taught to children and teens. You will see the kind of love that God is bringing through the likes of us.

I know we don't always get it right. But the more we listen for God the more becomes possible. Yes, it's scary to go deep and hard. But it is also incredibly exciting and hopeful. Like a whole lot of fish.

God brings in a new world through us, if we listen and follow.

Amen.