

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY  
Luke 5:1-11 - Following Jesus

After being rejected in his hometown, Jesus went out into other areas of Galilee - preaching, healing, and casting out demons. Everything he did and said, showed that he was fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy: "The Lord God's spirit is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me." Back home, his neighbours had chased him out of town. By contrast, throughout the rest of Galilee, people were chasing after him, begging him to stay, grabbing his ankles like children who can't bear to be left behind. Jesus was extending God's hospitality to people who had been made to feel unwelcome. So, today we pick up on an early morning on the Galilean coast. Jesus is preaching to yet another standing-room-only audience. The crowd is packed all the way to the shoreline. Jesus looks around and sees some fishermen washing up their nets after a hard night's work. He climbs into Simon's boat and asks him to put out a little from the shore. Sitting there, he uses the boat as a pulpit as he teaches the crowd. When finished, Jesus says to Simon, "Now go out where it is deeper and let down your nets, and you will catch many fish."

So, imagine! Simon and his business partners, James and John, sons of Zebedee, are professional fishermen. Fishing is their trade, their family business, their life's work. They've been trained to fish by their fathers, just as Jesus was trained as a carpenter by Joseph. So, here's a carpenter, telling a fisherman how to do his job. Put yourself in Simon's place. You might be tempted to tell Jesus: "Look, I don't tell you how to build your tables! And nets are meant for night fishing."

Simon protests, mostly from frustration. Last night's shift was a total bust. "Master, we worked hard all last night and didn't catch a thing," he tells Jesus. This was probably a very humiliating confession. After all, they're professionals. Probably, all they really wanted to do was go home and sleep off the humiliation of their failure. But wait, it's Jesus, the renowned preacher and healer, the one the crowds are chasing. So, reluctantly, Simon decides to shove off as Jesus directed. "But if you say so," Simon sighs. "We'll try again."

"If you say so," spoken like someone with nothing left to lose. This wasn't a very bold affirmation of faith. "If you say so" is rather noncommittal. It's the sort of thing you say when you've run out of options, or when you really don't believe the other person knows what they're talking about, but you're just too exhausted to argue with them.

Simon is worn out. He'd been working hard all night, and sat through a sermon - probably a long one at that. Simon is discouraged. After all, they'd worked all night for nothing. But, "if you say so" is all Simon had in him, and a willingness to try something new. It was good enough to go into the deep waters and put down the nets.

And no sooner were the nets lowered, that they caught a huge haul of fish, straining the nets past capacity. They waved to their partners in the other boat to come help them. They filled both boats, nearly swamping them with the catch. This catch—which threatened to shred their nets and sink their boats—had absolutely nothing to do with their skill as fishermen. Simon discovered that the One who could gather large crowds, could also chase boatloads of fish right

into ones nets.

And all it took from Simon was a half-hearted, “If you say so,” because half a heart was all he had to give. All it took from Simon was the willingness to push out into deep water and lower the nets, even if the whole time he was telling himself, “This is crazy! It will never work! Whoever heard of fishing in the daytime?”

Realizing what had happened, overwhelmed by the miraculous catch of fish, Simon fell to his knees before Jesus and said, “Oh, Lord, please leave me - I’m too much of a sinner to be around you.” This was not a plea for forgiveness, but an exclamation of awe, respect and inadequacy in the presence of the Holy.

Jesus does not offer absolution but invites Simon to drop his fear. Simon has heard God calling. Jesus responds not with moral cleansing but with the invitation “Do not be afraid.” These are God’s words spoken to each of us in response of our own awe. We heard it said to Zechariah, to Mary, to the shepherds in the field, and God says it to us: “Do not be afraid,” for you have found favour with God.”

In a flash of insight, Simon recognizes that Jesus was the One. And that recognition makes Simon...what, exactly? Aware of his shortcomings, of his inadequacies, of his failure? In some measure, perhaps. But more important - Simon realizes - he is in the presence of the Holy and Eternal and he, knows just how far he is from that. “Sinner,” in this sense, doesn’t simply designate Simon as a moral failure; rather, it signifies a qualitative difference between a mortal who is not yet what God created him to be and the One who is precisely and fully what God created him to be.

At heart, the word “sin” means “missing the mark,” not necessarily a moral wretch and certainly not one despised of God, or all of the other things we sometimes think “sin” designates. So what Simon is most keenly aware of in this moment - is that he has missed the mark. His life is not what it could be, not what it should be, not what God hopes and intends it to be.

Framing “sin” in this way helps us to imagine God as more than a cosmic judge and eternal rule-enforcer. Rather, God is the one who loves God’s creation and people, even when we miss the mark. God wants the best for us. God wants us to know that we are loved, that we enjoy God’s favour, and God wants us to live into that identity and future.

That’s why after Simon’s exclamation, Jesus doesn’t respond by saying “Your sins are forgiven.” Forgiveness is a powerful and important theme in the gospel. But at this moment Jesus responds to Simon’s confession not with forgiveness but with comfort and with purpose. “Do not be afraid.” This isn’t judgment, it’s mercy. And, “From now on you will be catching people.” Jesus doesn’t deny what Simon is – a fisherman – but, he enlarges it, meeting Simon where he is at and, rather than condemning him, expanding his vision, drawing him into God’s kingdom vision of who and what Simon might be.

And Jesus is doing the same with us. Wherever you are right now, at this moment, you also

have missed the mark. But rather than hear that as a word of condemnation, hear it instead as a word of love and invitation: "Do not be afraid." From now on you will be drawn into a mission and purpose larger than you can imagine.

Like the three fishermen, we must be open to God's presence to see and hear God beckoning us toward a new future, an new form of service. Like the weary men, we do have to do something to receive our calling. The men put their boats back out into the deep waters at Jesus' request. Like them, we must be open to the voice of the stranger, the wandering wise One in our midst.

God may come in the form of a stranger, or through a friend, or in our own inner voice which we have silenced. Like the disciples we must throw our nets into the deep waters. Shallow, tentative paddling is not allowed if we are to discern where God is calling us. This requires us to take risks. We could fail and come up with nothing. The boat could capsize. However, the nets we have fashioned for our safe, contained, settled lives might also break under the weight of our unlived lives.

When we risk what we have known for the sake of God's call we will be given the abundance we need, living out of love for God. Living into our vocations may bring hardships, but there is a kind of suffering and 'quiet desperation' which also comes with keeping our lives small.

Luke wanted people who hear this story to identify with Simon. Simon was empty that morning when Jesus saw him. His boat was empty. His nets were empty. But most of all, he, Simon was empty. And Jesus spoke to his emptiness when he told him, "Now go out where it is deeper and let down your nets, and you will catch many fish."

Many of us have an emptiness in us, some frustration, a longing unfulfilled, a dream deferred, a sense of our failure or inadequacy. Even the church itself can become full of emptiness. And this story leads us to acknowledge that feeling of emptiness, so we can hear Jesus' invitation to us.

Jesus re-focused Simon's vision on the nets full of fish - bursting at the seams - rocking the boat. It's as if he was telling Simon: "See how I filled your emptiness? There are so many empty people out there, feeling like you. Come with me, and help me fill them with grace and hope and life. Just like I filled your net."

In the same way, this story turns our eyes from our own emptiness—our sense of failure or frustration or inadequacy—to Jesus' fullness. Like Simon, Jesus calls to us - as his disciples - as his church. Jesus calls us to push out into deep water and let our nets down for a catch.

The story of the church is reflected to some degree in this story itself. When Jesus calls, Simon is hesitant and thinks that what Jesus asks of him is both unnecessary and too demanding. Nevertheless, Simon responds, and he discovers that life has a surprise in store for him. By doing what Jesus asks him to do, he experiences an epiphany of God.

We are not called to do ministry alone. "A shout for help brought their partners in the other boat."

Ministry is not to be a solitary journey but a community one. Solitary can be defined as individually alone, congregationally alone, or denominationally alone. We have to call on our partners in faith to work together to meet the needs of our communities, of our nation, of our world. We need to answer the call to follow Christ individually, but when we do, we become part of a much larger community, and then collectively we must also answer the call to follow Christ, gather our resources and work to build the community of Christ, meeting the needs of those who God places in our path.

Today we recognize Global Mission as a way that the ELCIC is able to grow and strengthen relationships with its companion and bilateral partner church relationships, in both synod-to-church and church-to-church manner. Through the lens of accompaniment, walking together in solidarity, we seek to actively listen to our partners and companions, share their joys and sorrows, and support them in their mission. The ELCIC, CLWR, and LWF all help and strengthen the missions we are all called to do. Through partnership, we accomplish so much more. CLWR in partnership with ELCIC, has a main focus on refugees, supporting refugees in camps and settlements overseas, and with being sponsored in Canada. They also assist with food security working closely with LWF in areas of international refugees.

So we are called to follow Jesus obediently into the depths of discipleship. It means turning the other cheek; giving the extra garment; going the extra mile; loving our enemies; welcoming people who aren't like us; forgiving seventy-seven times; loving each other like Jesus loves us. Jesus calls Simon as he calls us to leave behind the familiarity, values and behaviours of the wider society with its idolatry, exploitation, manipulation, injustice, scarcity, violence and death and live now as if the Realm of God is already present, with the living God, loving and believing all things, including mutual solidarity, justice, peace, love and life as represented by Global Mission.

Jesus calls us to follow him into the deep emptiness of our world and our neighbours, stretching out the net of his saving love and power that allows us to become more and more what God created us to be. And with the power of love, we are able to withstand pain and torment, and we are able to revel in joy and bliss. With love, we can endure great trials, face new challenges, and even overcome death. With love, we can help to heal the world that suffers and hurts greatly. With love, we can trust that God will provide all that we truly need. With love, we can invite people to join with us in revealing more and more of the miraculous power that is God. And even though we must acknowledge—like Simon—that we are often imperfect, that we miss the mark, we trust that when we push into the deep, it is Jesus who will fill the nets, who fills our emptiness, just as he did for Simon that morning. Amen.