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The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Year A, Luke 5:1-11

Sermon preached at Good Samaritan Episcopal Church, February 10, 2019

“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..”

I have a question about this morning’s Gospel reading that may, on the surface, seem silly. After Jesus fills their nets full of fish, why do Simon Peter and James and John leave those nets behind to follow Jesus? After all, these guys are responsible fishermen. Luke even goes to the trouble at the beginning of today’s passage to tell us that they are *washing* out their nets —these guys aren’t slackers or clock-watchers. Instead, they are pros. Wouldn’t it therefore make sense that they *do* something with all the fish Jesus gives to them? Didn’t they know Jesus was trying to help them out? Aren’t they looking a gift horse in the mouth?

After all, when Simon Peter and James and John sit down around the conference room table at the worldwide headquarters of Zebedee and Sons Fishing Company to map out their five-year strategic plan, today is *exactly* the kind of good fishing day they are shooting for...boatloads full of fish, so much so, that the boats almost sink! Yeah, put that down on the flip chart of company goals and dreams! So why didn’t they take all those fish to the market? Or, if they weren’t going to take them to market, why didn’t they send the fish home with the crowd? But, no. Instead, Luke paints us a very strange picture. James and John and Peter simply pull their boats onto the sandy shore of Lake Generasset, glistening with mounds of floppy, scaly, squirmy fish. The men toss their nets on top of the boats, and they unceremoniously walk away, leaving “everything.” What a waste! Or is it? Hold that thought...

Let’s back up to the beginning of the story. After a long night of work with no catch, these three fisherman decide to call it a day. With their boats pulled up on the shore of Lake Generasset, they are washing their nets and preparing to pack up and leave. All of a sudden, with a crowd on his tail, Jesus, the popular street preacher, commandeers one of Simon Peter’s boats, asks him to put out a bit into the lake so that there’s a little distance between Jesus and the crowds, and he begins another sermon. While Jesus is preaching from one side of the boat, I imagine Peter is a busy counterweight on the other side, loading up his tackle box, neatly folding his nets, and generally preparing himself to go home as he listens to Jesus preach. He hears Jesus winding up his sermon and is relieved he’ll soon be home to rest. But then, in a dramatic gesture, Jesus turns to Peter and says “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

The Greek word Luke uses for deep water here (*bathos*) has a double meaning... while it does mean deep water, it also signifies a primordial, chaotic sea. Here Peter is packed up, ready to go, waiting on Jesus to wrap up his sermon, and now Jesus asks him to put his net back out into the chaos? Peter politely argues back: “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” So into the deep water, the primordial chaos, Peter and the other fishermen go, and Luke tells us their nets are instantly full and their boats begin to sink. This freaks Peter out, and he asks Jesus to leave him: “Go away from me, for I am a sinful man!”

But Jesus does not go away; instead, Jesus invites Peter and James and John to not be afraid, and then he says “from now on, you will be catching people.” To be sure, this word that Luke uses, “catch”, has a lot of negative connotations in the traditional way the church has understood this language. Taken to mean “catch” as in “intercept and hold,” or “seize” or “trap,” as in what the

fishermen had been doing with and to the fish, this way of thinking about the work of discipleship is troubling. This implies a “one-way mode of relationship”¹ that is manipulative and that sees people as targets, souls to be saved, something broken that needs fixing.

I wonder if perhaps the church has been reading and interpreting this word “catching” all wrong for so many years, and if the fishermen leaving their nets and boats behind on the beach (both literally and figuratively) is the clue Luke gives us. What if, instead, Jesus means this: from now on, you’ll be “catching” (as in gently rescuing, helping, serving, loving, including, engaging, embracing?) people. Instead of “gotcha,” it’s more like, “We’ve got you! We’re with you! We’ve got your back!”

No wonder they leave their nets and boats, even as they brim with all those freshly caught fish. These men realize they’re no longer in the business of *catching* (trapping, seizing, intercepting); that’s the world’s understanding of the word catch. Instead, they’re now in the business of *catching* (rescuing, helping, serving, including, loving). They no longer need their old tools and equipment, so much so that they leave everything behind on the beach to follow Jesus without so much as a care as to what happens to it all.

At the core of it all, Luke is trying to tell us: if you’re going to be a follower of Jesus Christ, if you’re going to be one of his disciples, you won’t be needing a net, you won’t be needing a boat, you won’t be needing any of the traditional tools that the world has needed to “catch” things. In Jesus’ realm, in God’s realm, they are useless. You can leave them all behind. Instead, if you’re going to be a disciple of Jesus, you will be “catching” people by loving them, including them, serving them, being present with them, being in relationship with them. No exceptions. (Sound familiar?) Luke’s Gospel is chock full of these sort of “catching” stories; in fact, Luke has more stories of Jesus engaging and serving and loving and healing and including people who are outcast and in the margins than any other Gospel writer.

This morning, Jesus is here, on this sandy shore, calling us, the people of Good Samaritan, to put our nets down into the chaos of the deep, primordial sea that surrounds us. To be certain, the fishermen in today’s story aren’t running away to follow Jesus into a blissful world where nothing is wrong. Quite the opposite. Jesus is telling them: “Put down your nets into the sea of tensions and chaos that surround us on every side right now, that we can’t seem to escape.” In other words, put down your nets, Good Samaritans, into the primordial, chaotic sea of a nation and a state that cannot escape the racist sins of its past and present. Put down your nets into the primordial, chaotic sea where people seem more divided and isolated than ever. Put down your nets into the primordial, chaotic sea where the old church is dying and the new church that looks and feels very different from it is rising from the dead. Put down your nets into the chaotic sea where everything is swirling and changing and nothing is the same as it was yesterday, where everything seems messy and hopeless and scary and discombobulating all at once.

And what happens when Peter and James and John put down their nets? What happens when we put down our nets into the primordial sea? Jesus shows these fishermen, Jesus shows us: I am with you. God is with you. In the chaos. In the mess. In the swirl. Jesus fills our nets, our boats to the brim. Each week, we come to this Eucharist, to this feast, and God fills our nets with grace beyond our capacity. Jesus’ power comes into our bodies through the bread and in the wine. In this Eucharist, God fills us with the miraculous, with the holy, with the blessedness of God’s love. God gives us what we need to live on, the daily bread for which we’ve been asking, and God gives always gives us more grace than we will ever need, even amidst the primordial chaos that seemingly ever surrounds us.

¹ With thanks to Ronald Allen’s online commentary at WorkingPreacher.org for the idea:
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3958

God, out of God's deep love for us, offers us grace amidst-the-chaos that is so abundant, it is overwhelming. Scary, even. (No wonder Peter says to Jesus, "Go away from me, for I am a sinful man!")

But like Peter, Jesus won't go away from us, either. Instead, Jesus invokes the mantra God has been gently saying to God's beloved since the beginning of time: "Do not be afraid." And then, like Peter and James and John, Jesus then invites us into God's holy work: "From now on, you will be catching people." He calls us, he invites us, he draws us into a deeper, more complex relationship with Him and with our world. Each time we feast at this holy table, Jesus asks us to leave behind one more old net full of fish from our old lives, to leave behind our old understanding of the word "catch" that the world loves so much, and to do something very different: to "catch" others.

This morning, here, in this Eucharist, Jesus is blessing us more than we will ever know. As we speak, our nets are being filled, our lives are being replenished, miracles are being worked in our midst. Places we once thought empty are being made full; moments of famine are now becoming moments of feast. A world we think of as chaotic and a mess has more grace than we ever thought possible and God is revealing that grace to us.

Yet even now, Jesus is inviting us to more. If we can follow James and Peter and John's example and leave our nets, walk away from things that are old, if we can heed Jesus' call to catch, to love, serve, include, heal, tend, engage, repair, connect....then, then are doing the work of God. That is this congregation's call, that is our mission, that is who we are. Friends, shall we put down our nets into the chaos? And seeing God's grace that is abundant, can we then leave those nets behind to go and do God's holy work of catching?