

“Going Fishing”

Luke 5:1-11

The Christian life is all about knowing and serving the Son of God who came to be the Savior of the world. How and when that kind of relationship with the risen Christ begins for each of us depends on who we are and what is going on in our lives at the time. Some of us sort of ‘slide’ into that relationship of trust and love because we have had the benefit of growing up in homes where Jesus has always seemed to be present. Others of us have had profound experiences which can only be described in terms like ‘being converted’ or ‘born again.’ The fact of the matter is that the Holy Spirit brings us to a saving relationship with Christ at that time, and in that way which He knows is best suited to who we are. But that relationship is always rooted in God’s Word where Jesus makes Himself know to us.

So the best place to begin such a relationship is with the Four Gospels as they give us the opportunity to watch the Son of God in action, and to listen to the message He has for each of us. And the first thing I would point out, about how that relationship begins is that saying No to Jesus can be a hard thing to do. For one thing, He always speaks with authority. If you’ve got a Bible with the words of Jesus in red print, one thing you cannot escape is that He comes across as someone who knows what He’s talking about and who tells it like it is. When we listen carefully to what the Teacher is saying there isn’t much room for denying the truth of the message He brings. He knows the human heart and He understands the human condition. When, out of His deep love for each of us, He speaks His authoritative Word to you and me, it can be pretty hard to say, “No, that’s just not true.”

Not only that, the longer we are around Him and the more time we spend with Him, the more we realize that He sees Himself as the Lord of all. You’ll notice in our Scripture Lesson this morning that when Jesus sees the size of the crowd coming to hear Him teach, He realizes that if He is going to be heard He will have to be sitting in a boat out on the lake where the water will provide the perfect acoustics for the people to hear Him. He sees two boats pulled up on the shore and He essentially commandeers one of them, and tells Peter to push off from the water’s edge. He doesn’t ask if He may use the boat, He simply climbs aboard. He isn’t being arrogant. He needs it in order to carry out the work His Father has given Him to do, and so He claims it. And there is no way that Peter can say, No to the One he calls, ‘Master’ and soon will call, ‘Lord’.

But I doubt very much that Peter would have said No, even if the thought had entered his mind. For not long before the Lord stepped into that boat, He had already spent a night at Peter's home. And while He was there He healed Peter's mother-in-law, who was suffering from a severe fever. I'm sure that Peter feels a sense of obligation to this One who has been so kind to his wife's mother. He could hardly say No. And in a similar way, when you and I begin to recognize how kind and generous the Son of God has been to us in so many ways, we, too, discover a sense of indebtedness to the One who is the giver of all the blessings we enjoy. And as those feelings of gratitude grow deeper and stronger we find ourselves less and less able to say No to whatever it is of ours that the Son of God wants to claim as His own.

But the bottom line in all of this is the fact that when we begin to deal with the Lord, we very quickly discover that He is not in the business of making suggestions or simply giving helpful advice. When it comes to belonging to Him and following where He leads, it is always a matter of straightforward commands. He makes very clear, in no uncertain terms what He wants from us and expects of us. When He tells us how He wants us to live our lives, how we're to deal with those around us, the kinds of values we're to cherish and live by, He is not offering us options to choose from. And if we're going to throw in our lot with Him, He simply will not take No for an answer. For with every command there comes the promise that He will be with us and strengthen us to the end. Taking that promise seriously makes it hard to say No.

But if, when we hear Jesus calling us to come and follow Him, we find it hard to say No, we can also find it downright frightening to say Yes. When we begin to catch a glimpse of who the Son of God, the Holy One of Israel, really is, we recognize how unworthy we are of His calling. Like Peter, our response is, "Lord, depart from me, for I am a sinner." The reality is that the longer we walk with the Lord the more conscious of our sin we become. It is a scary thing to realize that the pure and perfect Son of God wants us to be His representatives here on earth. How in the world can we possibly take on that responsibility? The very best thing anyone can say about us is that we're forgiven sinners who are works in progress. It is truly intimidating to think that we can be Christians, that is, 'little Christs,' to those around us.

It can not only be frightening to say Yes to the call of Christ, it can also be perplexing. The Lord is in the practice of commanding us to do things that seem downright unreasonable. Peter has spent the entire night out on the lake trying to catch fish, and he comes to the shore with empty nets. Then Jesus, a carpenter, not a fisherman, comes along and tells him to push out into the lake and bring in a catch. To Peter it doesn't make sense. But he obeys, and the Son of God keeps His Word. So when you and I come across a commandment that seems unreasonable, like forgiving seventy times seven, or when we hear a teaching which seems improbable, like blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth, it may not be an easy thing to say with Peter, "But because You say so, I will take You at Your Word, and let down the nets."

Beyond that, Peter's experience reminds us that when the Lord calls us to come and follow Him, He expects us to leave behind the past and all that we hold dear. Peter and Andrew, James and John, pull their boats up onto the shore and walk away from everything that has been central to their lives up to that point in time. For the next three years they will travel with Jesus throughout the Holy Land, leaving their families, their fishing business, their homes and neighbors behind. And though the Lord may never ask that kind of sacrifice from you and me, His expectation is, that if He does, we, too, will rise and go wherever He may send us. When we make the commitment to be His disciples He wants us to factor in what the cost may be. And that can be a little scary when it comes time to say Yes.

And whatever else the call of Christ may involve, it always involves seeing the people around us from a whole new perspective, which can also be a little disconcerting not to mention, inconvenient. In Second Corinthians the Apostle Paul writes that when we are in Christ and grasp His saving love for the whole world we no longer look at others as we once did, from a worldly point of view. Everyone we meet is someone for whom the Savior died. No one is unimportant. No one is insignificant. The clerk in the grocery store, the serving person in the restaurant, the kids who sits alone in the cafeteria, the homeless person on the street corner. Saying Yes to the Savior puts us in the debt of all those He places on our hearts. We have an obligation to share with them the Good News of God's saving love in Christ

Which brings me to the new work which the Son of God gives to Peter, and also to you and me: He says, “I will make you fishers of men and women. You will be catching people for Me.” The kind of fishing Peter and his comrades have been up to involves using nets and lowering them into the water to surround a school of fish and then hauling those nets into the shore and emptying them there. And there is a sense in which that is very much the way our Savior wants us to catch people for Him. He has described the Kingdom of Heaven, the Church here on the earth, as a net which He will use to draw people to Himself. As a community of believers we have been given the responsibility of surrounding the people around us with expressions of Christ’s love and forgiveness, of His mercy and His grace.

And just as Peter needed to call his partners to come and help him haul in that miraculous catch of fish on the Sea of Galilee, neither did the Lord expect him to catch men and women by himself. This business of bringing people to Christ is a task we are called to do together. Perhaps one of the best examples of that is the work done by our young people and the adults who go with them each year on our annual work camp experience. It is in working together, helping those in need and sharing with them the Good News of forgiveness and new life through faith in Jesus, that the net of God’s love, as it is woven by and expressed in each work camper, becomes a fishing expedition for the kingdom of heaven. And as a result of those efforts the Holy Spirit opens people’s hearts and they come to trust in Christ.

When it comes to fishing for people it is well for us to remember that when Jesus tells his story about the kingdom being like a net, he reminds us that when that net is pulled up and emptied out at the end of the ages, we’re going to find out that not all the fish in it were good. And it certainly is true that the Church today has genuine believers in it as well as those who have never truly put their trust in Christ. But the important thing for us to note is that we don’t have to be responsible for the catch. That’s the Lord’s job. He will sort it all out when He returns to judge the living and the dead. So whether the catch is large or small, whether the ‘fish’ are good or bad, is not our concern. Our task is simply to be faithful as we serve together to bring others into the sphere of Christ’s love.

That may sound like a pretty overwhelming task for us to undertake. But don't overlook the assurance which the Lord gives to Peter when He calls him: He says, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." When I was a little kid we used to sing a song with these words, "I will make you fishers of men, fishers of men, fishers of men. I will make you fishers of men if you follow Me." I think Jesus wants us to remember that as we seek to be faithful followers. We don't have to be afraid. He will make us into the kind of people He knows we need to be to reach others for Him. He will give us the kinds of experiences we need. He will provide us with the kinds of gifts we need. He will bless us with the opportunities we need to prepare us to be good fisherfolk whom He can use to draw others to Himself.

And the most comforting part of this whole story of Peter's call is that Jesus is with him from the beginning to the end. He is there in the boat with Peter while He teaches the crowd gathered on the shore. He is there with Peter in the boat when He tells him to launch out into the deep. He is there when that miraculous catch takes place. He is there when Peter says, "Go away from me, Lord I am a sinful person." He is there when they returned to the shore and leave everything to follow Him. He is there with Peter through three years of training. And at the very end, after Peter has denied even knowing Him, and has returned to the Sea of Galilee to go fishing once again, the risen Christ is there, giving him another miraculous catch of fish and a whole new task. In addition to fishing for people he is to be like a shepherd to the sheep and lambs of God's new flock.

I firmly believe that if we're seeking to be open, and listening with our hearts, we will hear Christ calling to us. If we spend time in God's Word the Savior will make Himself known to us. And He will invite us, in no uncertain terms, to come and follow Him. And once we've recognized Him for who He is, and acknowledged how much He loves us, we will find it hard to say No to that call. It may scare us. At times it may confuse us. It will almost certainly challenge us as it changes us and the way we look at the world and the people He sends into our lives. But it is only in surrendering to His love and responding to His call to share that love as part of the net which expresses it, that we will fulfill the desire of the One who isn't willing that we or anyone for whom He died should perish for lack of faith in Him. Beloved of the Lord, Christ is calling you. Amen.

As Pastor Karl often reminds us as we prepare to leave our times of worship: You go nowhere by accident. Wherever you go God is sending you. Wherever you are, God has put you there, and has a purpose in your being there. Christ, who has come to live in your heart, has something He wants to do through you – right where you are. So, if you have said Yes to His call, you are part of the net He has cast into the world wherever you may be, and He is saying to you just what He once said to Peter: “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will be fishing for people.” Go, then, confident that the Lord goes before you and that He goes with you. And as, together, we take part in this great fishing expedition, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God our heavenly Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us this day and always. Amen.