

Epiphany 5c – February 9, 2025

Luke 5:1-11

Sermon theme: A call to faith and discipleship

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus.
Amen. Dear friends in Christ:

Our Gospel readings during the season of Epiphany tell of Jesus' early ministry. And our reading today tells of the time when Jesus called his first disciples.

As I always mention when we read an account of these callings, it's important to remember that Jesus' calls to these men were both a specific call for the purpose of leadership training and also a simple call to faith. Peter, James and John would receive training in order to become apostles – meaning those who were sent into the mission field to serve and to lead. This was the service Jesus pointed to when he explained that they would be fishing for men. But first they all needed to place their trust in Jesus and follow him as disciples. Jesus was teaching a whole new way of understanding faith and he wanted them to know the Good News.

It is because of the call to ministry in these texts that the church has decided to pair them with Old Testament readings such as the one we read today from Isaiah chapter six. In this text we hear of Isaiah's call to ministry. God at that time was looking to raise up a prophet for his people and he chose Isaiah, who was already a believer, to take on the task. God appeared to him in a glorious vision and assured him of his forgiveness, at which point Isaiah then responded to God's call by eagerly saying: "*Here am I! Send me.*"

Like Isaiah, Peter and his friends' call was also accompanied by a vision of God's glory. They all witnessed a great miracle – a large catch of fish that they couldn't explain. And this vision certainly impacted their decision to take accept Jesus' invitation. In fact, as the story reads, this seems to be the most powerful aspect of the call. We're told that when Simon Peter and the others saw the catch, they were astonished. And Peter even fell down on his knees and expressed his unworthiness to be in Jesus' presence.

People are generally moved by great acts of power. And this is especially true when these acts fall under the category of a miracle. I know that a number of us here have been moved by such things.

Likewise, people tend to be even more moved when that act of power provides something particularly helpful. Here in this story, Jesus' miracle provided an abundance of fish. That great catch would certainly pay Peter and his friend's bills for a number of months and enable them to comfortably take a little time off. And this perhaps served as a further encouragement for them to go ahead and see what Jesus' calling was all about.

Here I think it would be good for us to stop and think a bit about how God's great provision impacts us. In doing this, we might think that a comparable situation to today's story would be

for us to receive a great windfall – like perhaps unexpectedly inheriting a great sum of money or receiving a huge raise at work. If that happened, we would certainly be moved.

But isn't it true that most of us are already very rich. God has provided for us abundantly. If we're able to eat, be properly clothed, receive health care, sleep at night with a roof over our head, live without fear of attack from a war, and have a measure of time for leisure, then we are wealthier and better off than most people on this planet.

The question then becomes how we respond to this abundance. Do we put our trust in the one who has made our abundance possible and follow him as a disciple and worker? Or do we just go on with life as if God isn't around or doesn't care?

God has done big things for us. As Luther teaches us in the Catechism, "God has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears and all my members, my reasons and all my senses, and still preserves them." And the list only gets bigger from there.

The biggest thing that God gives us is the forgiveness of our sins. God gives this forgiveness to us as a gift– one that we are neither deserving of nor can ever earn on our own. Isaiah's vision makes all of this clear as God comes to him and touches him with a burning coal and clearly announces that his sin has been atoned for. Notice that Isaiah did not atone for his own sins. He couldn't, it had to be done by someone else. We know that this someone was Jesus, God's Son, who years later gave his life on the cross for the sins of the world.

When we know of God's forgiveness, we are able to move beyond our guilt and despair, and to go forward in life with confidence. This is something for which we should all be grateful.

In our story today, Peter is the one who voices the concern that people naturally have over their sin. After the great catch of fish, Peter fell down on his knees and cried out: "*Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.*" Peter knew that he wasn't worthy to be in the presence of one who could do the things that only God can do, and this was now the second or maybe third miracle of Jesus that he had seen. Peter had seen his mother-in-law be healed of a fever. And he may have also been in that synagogue in Capernaum when Jesus cleansed a man from an unclean spirit. Peter may not have yet known that Jesus was God incarnate, but he knew that Jesus possessed God's power and authority.

In the same way, when Isaiah received his vision of God's glory, he too reacted by acknowledging his unworthiness to witness such a holy scene. "*Woe to me! For I am lost,*" he said. And then he explained his lostness by telling of the sins which made him unclean.

Peter and Isaiah's responses serve as a reminder that our sin is an issue that must be dealt with if we are to follow God in faith. And this is especially true if we are to also serve as a leader. Sin is something that hinders our good efforts. And without God's intervention it only multiplies.

Likewise, these stories are also a reminder that without a knowledge of our forgiveness we will despair of our inability to do good. This is a point made by C.F.W. Walther in his book *The*

Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel. I looked into this book because we are studying it in our Sunday morning Bible Classes right now and I figured there might be a reference to our Gospel reading in the book. Sure enough there is. Walther points out that on that day Peter fell on his knees in despair because he did not yet understand the Gospel. He only understood the Law.

Jesus' miracles were clear signs of the good news of the Gospel. But Peter did not yet realize this. It took listening to Jesus' teachings in order for Peter to understand that God forgives our sins. And Peter only fully understood this after realizing that Jesus died for our sins and that he rose again as a sign of victory over them.

Peter would learn this lesson over time by listening to Christ's words. But interestingly, there is a hint already in today's story that Peter was well on his way.

Before Peter fell on his knees in awe and shame, Peter first took Jesus out on the boat at Jesus' request. And as we heard, Peter at that time hesitated a bit by saying: "*Master, we toiled all night and took nothing!*" As a fisherman, Peter certainly figured he knew more about catching fish than this teacher.

But notice that Peter didn't hesitate much. For he then quickly added: "*But at your word I will let down the nets.*" And this he did.

Peter's action in taking Jesus out on the boat was a clear step of faith. And here we should notice that Peter took this step in response to the words Jesus had spoken, giving his assent by saying: "*At your word.*"

This is now our third reading in a row where a specific reference is made to Christ's words. Two Sundays ago we heard the people listening to Jesus marvel at his "*gracious words.*" And last Sunday the people responded to his miracle of healing by saying: "*What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!*"

The point of all these references is that Jesus' words have power. When Peter says, "*At your word I will let down the nets,*" he is not just referring to a point in time when Jesus will offer his command. Nor is he simply stating his obedience. Other translations will have him say: "*Because you said so I will let down the nets,*" (NIV) and that works too. But what we're really meant to catch here is the powerful effect Jesus' words were having upon Peter. Peter had just been listening to Jesus teach while the two of them were there in that boat. He would have clearly heard the words Jesus was saying. And we know Jesus' words move people's hearts.

Peter, as the text makes clear, took his first step of faith in response to Jesus' words. And by taking this step, he saw a great miracle and found a new call.

The same is true for us. When we listen to Jesus we will be moved. And the more we listen, the more we will be moved.

Likewise, the more we act in faith, the more we will see. A small push-out in a boat can lead to a great catch of fish.

Jesus speaks to us, calls us to faith, and works in our hearts and lives. Today's readings call us to consider whether we ought to be listening a little more closely, or whether we ought to be taking new steps of faith in obedience to him.

Perhaps Jesus is calling you to push out in the boat with him a little more. Or perhaps he is calling you to work in his kingdom a little more. Both are steps of faith. And both are prompted by Christ's call through his word.

About that kingdom work, let's use our remaining time in the sermon to do a little more thinking about what Jesus means with his phrase "catching men." Certainly Jesus means by this that his followers are to work toward the goal of bringing others into his kingdom, for living in the kingdom is not only the best way to live but also the path of salvation. Disciples of Jesus will want this for others— all others. And they will work toward this just like fishermen will work to bring fish into a boat.

But of course this metaphor of Jesus has its limitations too. Fishermen forcibly take fish out of the water using nets or lure them out of the water using bait. Disciples of Jesus, however, are not to force or lure people into the kingdom. Rather we invite, encourage, teach and pray. Perhaps we should remember that Jesus used the metaphor because he was addressing fishermen.

Yes, the church should definitely be about the task of evangelism. Evangelism is spreading the Gospel – that's what the word means. And the church can strive to make itself attractive to others too – but only by highlighting what is Godly and by presenting itself in ways that are genuine.

Our New Testament reading today, although not specifically chosen to correspond with today's Gospel, also sheds some light on this topic. First Corinthians 14 reading speaks to the choices we Christians make in our worship, and as it does this, it mentions a goal that we are to have – that of building people up. The teaching is that we should choose expressions of worship that build people up – all people, and not just some.

In the same way, it seems to me that the task of fishing for men could also be thought of as an effort to build people up. We want people to be better, not just a part of the group. As such, the church will put great effort into teaching, proclaiming, encouraging and serving, and far less into determining who's in or out of the boat.

As we all know, there are many, many things in this life which break people down. We live in a dangerous and grief-filled world. How important it is that the church be about building people up. We have the message and the Spirit to build faith, wisdom, character and community – all the things that people need the most.

Jesus called Peter and his friends so that they would be built up in these same ways... and so that they could learn to build up others too. He called them to follow him – which they would do by first listening to him and by then carrying out the work he taught and equipped them to do.

In the same way, Jesus has called each of us. Whether we are pastor or parishioner, minister or member, we have all received the same call to discipleship. And as such, we are all to follow him by listening to his words and by stepping out with him in service, including fishing for men.

God will bless us through our discipleship. And God will use us to bring blessings to others as well.

Thanks be to God for this calling! May God lead us and guide us in it always. In the name of Jesus. Amen.