

Rev. Janet R. Doyle
Elmer Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday after Epiphany
Sunday, February 2, 2025
Scripture: Luke 5: 1-11
Sermon: Let Down Your Nets

Each of us has those life changing moments in our lives. When we graduate from high school or college, get our first job, get married, have children, experience the death of someone dear to us, face an illness, have grandchildren, retire, move to a new town or state or country, a natural disaster, an accident. There are so many events in our lives that change us forever.

I suspect you have had those moments also. Births, deaths, times of transition, medical close calls, and for some, there have even been devastating times that have caused you to find something deep within you that you would have never known was there. As we look back we may not be thankful for the events themselves but the lessons we learned were life changing.

This morning we are going to look at the experience that changed the lives of Peter, his brother Andrew and their partners James and John when they were fishing, and they had an encounter with Jesus.

Jesus was standing near the Lake of Gennesaret also known by its other name, the Sea of Galilee. The Lake was thirteen miles long and eight miles wide. Jesus was teaching the word of God and the people were crowding in, pushing Jesus back toward the water. Jesus saw Simon's or Peter's empty fishing boat and he got into the boat and asked Simon to push off just a little from the shore. From here Jesus continued to teach for a period of time.

We learn some significant facts that are important for the story. First, the boat belonged to fishermen who were washing their nets. So, we know this was a professional fishing boat. We also know that the night of fishing had ended, and the men were cleaning up their nets. These nets were big and heavy, and they would be cast into the Lake over and over again during the night, usually in a 100-foot circle, and then it would be drawn

back into the boat. This went on all night. It was a good job but an exhausting job.

We also learn that this particular boat belonged to Simon Peter. So, we know that Simon Peter was a fisherman, and he was probably very tired. If Luke is writing chronologically, Simon and Jesus already knew each other. Jesus had healed Simon's mother-in-law, so it is only natural that Simon would be happy to help Jesus.

Things get interesting when Jesus finishes teaching the people. In verses 4 and 5 we read, "When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.'" Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

Notice several things. First, Jesus asked Simon to take the boat back out fishing after they had just returned from working all night. Second, he asked him to go back out and fish even though they had already, or had almost, cleaned their nets, which meant they would have to start all over again. Third, notice that Jesus asks them to go back out and fish after they had fished all night and caught nothing.

Everyone who fished in that lake knew that you did not catch fish during the daytime in deep water. You do that at nighttime. If this is the case, then Jesus is asking Peter to do something which seems absolutely absurd and quite frankly a waste of time. Peter was fine with Jesus using his boat for a pulpit but now he was asking for the impossible.

This is the moment of crisis in Peter's life. Here is the pivotal decision: would he trust Jesus: Even though his friends would not be pleased to clean the net again? Even though it didn't make any sense to Him? Even though it went against everything he had ever been taught? Even though it was going to mean more work for him? Even though it would make him look foolish in front of his friends? Peter passed the test. Don't miss an important principle: The life-changing moments come when we show genuine love for Christ by trusting Him even though it seems foolish or impossible.

Peter went out into the deep not out of a desire for a great catch of fish. He went out into the deep for one purpose: to honor the Lord.

Peter may not have been enthusiastic about doing what Jesus told Him to do, but He did it anyway. I don't know about you, but I am

encouraged by his lack of enthusiasm. I'm glad that even half-hearted obedience is still better than disobedience.

Luke does not tell us what Jesus taught the crowds that morning. The focus is on what follows. Jesus tells Simon to put out into the deep water and let down his nets for a catch. Simon obviously believes this will be a futile exercise. He is a professional fisherman, after all. We can almost hear the exasperation in his voice when he responds, "Master, we have worked all night but have caught nothing." But then he continues; "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets" (5:4-5).

We know what happens next — nets so full of fish that they begin to break, boats so full of fish that they begin to sink. Seeing what is happening, Simon is overwhelmed with fear and wonder, sensing that he is in the presence of divine power. He responds by falling down at Jesus' knees and begging him, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (5:6-8)

Simon is caught by surprise. In the midst of his ordinary daily grind, and in fact, after a particularly difficult night at work, he is encountered by one who changes everything. Amazed by the power of God displayed in the abundant catch of fish, Simon is immediately aware of his sinfulness and unworthiness.

Jesus responds to Simon by saying, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people" (5:10). The Greek word for "*catching*" used here (*zogron*) is rare in the New Testament but means "*to catch alive.*" Of course, fishing with nets was a matter of catching fish alive, but those live fish would soon be dead. Here Jesus calls Simon and his partners to a new vocation of catching people so that they might live, a life-giving vocation of being caught up in God's mission of salvation for all.

Although they have just brought in the greatest catch of their fishing careers, Simon Peter, James, and John leave those boatloads of fish behind and follow Jesus (1:11). Their encounter with Jesus has completely changed their lives forever.

This text offers rich possibilities for reflecting on how God calls ordinary people to discipleship and mission. After all, there is nothing the slightest bit extraordinary about Simon Peter and his fishing partners. They are simple fishermen, and they are simply doing what they did every day. They are minding their own business, cleaning their nets after a long,

particularly discouraging night of work, when Jesus comes along, enters into their utterly normal, mundane lives and changes everything.

Jesus calls Simon and his partners as they are. Simon is acutely aware of his unworthiness, but Jesus is not put off by this in the slightest. Jesus does not ask Simon to get his resume prepared, and then come back for an interview. Rather, Jesus encounters him as he is, tells him not to be afraid, and calls him to a new mission of catching people.

God calls imperfect people to do God's work, people who are aware of their imperfections and are often doubting and resistant to God's call. God doesn't wait for them to shape up. God calls them as they are and then works on shaping them into faithful servants.

Simon Peter resists going out into the deep waters and let down the nets because he is convinced that the fish are not biting. They have worked all night and caught nothing. We can hardly blame him for his skepticism.

How often do we resist Jesus' claim on our lives because what he is calling us to do seems too crazy, too impractical? How often do we avoid putting out into the deep waters of following and bearing witness to Jesus because we are convinced that we will not see any results? What might it mean for us to go deep-sea fishing with Jesus, to trust and follow him outside our comfort zones, to let go of our certainties, to have our lives radically changed?

For most of us, this will not mean leaving our current professions behind, although that has happened. We all are called by virtue of our faith in Jesus to participate in God's mission to the world in the name of Jesus Christ. We all are called daily to change our priorities to align with God's priorities, to use the gifts God has given us in service to others, to share the good news of Christ in word and deed.

Jesus' mission does not wait until we think we are ready. The need for the gospel in this broken world is far too urgent. We are called right now to let down our nets even in spite of our frailty, failures, and doubts, even in the midst of our ordinary, busy, complicated lives.

Jesus' word to Simon Peter is also a word to us: "Do not be afraid." This is Jesus' mission, and we trust that he will keep working with us and through us, "catching" others as he has caught us, in the deep, wide net of God's mercy and love. We trust, finally, that the catch is in God's hands, and that God's desire is for the nets to be bursting and the boats full.

Jesus calls us to let down our nets and see what God will do right before our eyes. For Peter and the others following Christ meant leaving behind the old life, giving up the boats and the nets and their livelihood, and following Christ into an unknown future. Letting go must always come first. Anything that hinders our walk with Christ must go. Even some good things must go in order that better things may come from the Lord. We can't have it both ways.

The word for "followed" means "to walk the same road." That's what a disciple does. A disciple walks the same road as Jesus wherever it may lead. No guarantees, no deals, no special promises. As disciples we simply walk that road every day, following in his master's steps.

Don't be afraid to follow Jesus. You'll never regret starting down the road. You'll only regret that you waited so long to do it.

Are you ready to follow Jesus wherever he leads? That's all he wants. "Don't be afraid," said Jesus, "From now on, you will be fishing for people."

LET DOWN YOUR NETS!