

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

February 10, 2019

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Luke 5:1-11

Fishing with Jesus

You may know this already, but fishing is not always easy!

The story goes about the man who went on a three-day fishing trip. He caught absolutely nothing - no fish at all and was very frustrated and embarrassed to return home empty-handed.

So he went to the local fish market, and says to the guy behind the counter, "Throw me two of those big salmon, and two of those big tilapias."

So the guy working behind the counter takes the fish, wraps them up and hands them to the fisherman who says "Can you actually throw them to me please? That way, if anyone asks me if I caught any fish on my trip, I can truthfully say, 'I sure did. I caught four big ones!'"

Obviously, this man had not been fishing with Jesus. Because fishing with Jesus requires two things:

Trust

Humility

And fishing with Jesus will result in two things:

Abundance

New life

Simon Peter and his friends were actually done with their fishing for the night and were cleaning things up and putting their nets away when we begin this story. And having been out all night and having caught nothing, I imagine they were tired, frustrated, discouraged - maybe a little annoyed at the commotion nearby on the shore; Jesus teaching the word of God and large crowds moving in to hear what he had to say around him. My guess is that Peter just wanted to go home when Jesus asked him if he could borrow his boat.

And then perhaps Peter is turning to leave the lake and return to his family, when Jesus turns to him and tells him to put out his nets into the deep water. Now, from Peter's perspective, there is so much wrong with this.

First of all, can't he see that they've just cleaned everything up and put it all away?

Second, clearly the fish weren't biting - they caught nothing all night.

And lastly, what does Jesus know about fishing? He's a carpenter - this is not his trade!

And this is where we see the trust!

You see, Peter had just seen Jesus heal his mother-in-law right before this happened, so Peter knows something of Jesus' power. And his trust becomes faith and his faith becomes obedience. "I will let down the nets again - BECAUSE YOU SAY SO."

Sometimes we just need to head out into the deep waters and let down our nets for no better reason than Jesus has asked us to do so. Because sometimes God calls us to obedience without showing us the end result. IF we're going to venture into deep waters - something unfamiliar, something uncomfortable - we need to trust Jesus.

If we attempt only things we know are possible with the resources we already have, we may miss out on the abundant life Christ wants for us.

When Peter goes out fishing with Jesus, we see that the ordinary is never the ordinary when Jesus is around. One last gasp cast of the net brings in a load of fish so huge the nets are strained and Peter needs help hauling it in as they fill two boats 'til they're beginning to sink!

An amazing catch, made in deep water where there should have been no catch; at a time of day when there should have been no catch.

This is definitely NOT the story of the one who got away! Fish stories are often stories of exaggeration – but not here – this time it's true! This isn't a run of good luck; this is what happens when you put your trust in Jesus.

It's like that with him. You see, Jesus did not come simply to make each one of us into some kind of metaphorical fishermen - going out to catch souls with a line of faith. He came so that each one of us might have an abundant life, a full and rich life, a life in which we know and experience the love of God, a life which is overflowing with God's grace so that it spills all over the people around us as well.

In the place where Simon and his fellow fishermen had already been working, in the place they thought they knew, in the place where they had come up empty, they receive a stunning catch, lavish beyond measure.

Sometimes we need to risk one more failure, to go and do what our common sense tells us cannot be done, and to try what we know will not work.

And then we'll see that trust begets abundance. And abundance begets – humility. Peter falls down and admits his own sinfulness. If he thought he was in over his head when Jesus told them to go out fishing again, he's really in deep waters now!

But even though we might not know what's awaiting us in the deep waters, Jesus knows what we're getting into. After all, this is God's mission we're on, not our own. And so Jesus assures Peter and us, "Do not be afraid."

Trust – Abundance – Humility – and then new life following Jesus.

Fish weren't the only catch of the day; Simon and his companions were hooked. Captivated. Called. And that's what miracles do: they meet us at our point of need, but they do not leave us there. They call us to move from being recipients to being participants, to share in the ways that God pours out Himself for the life of the community and the healing of the world.

And I think a clue to this new life is found in the fact that abundance is found in the deep water – when we're in over our heads.

I also think Jesus is constantly inviting us into the deep places. I think he doesn't want us to be paddling around in the shallows of life where we often spend so much of our time.

Even when we want to play it safe, he's calling us to have courage and trust in him. Even as we cling to our familiar fears and anxieties, he's calling us to step out in faith and freedom. He's calling us to face our doubts and fears, to say Yes to following him no matter where it might take us.

And when we do – nothing is ever the same again.

Years ago when I thought I might go to Africa for sabbatical, I discovered an orphanage in Uganda that was started by a young woman, Sara, from Texas. My sabbatical was still years away, but I thought serving there might be a possibility, so I subscribed to their monthly newsletter and started following them on Facebook. When it came time to make plans, they were not receiving volunteers during the time block I was planning on going. But for some reason I decided to continue receiving / following them.

Through the years, Sara met and married a Ugandan man, they adopted three children and gave birth to two. Their orphanage was growing and so they bought property farther out so they could build a bigger

place. They have a sizable school, staff, program, and farm there now. Most recently though, Sara and Joseph separated as he had become abusive toward her and the children. (All this from her newsletters!)

This week's email with attached newsletter said this...

Rafiki Friends,

I consider it a huge blessing to be able to live in and serve the people of Uganda. Some people think that missionaries have to give up so much. Yes! As followers of Christ, we are expected to give sacrificially, but with following the path that God has put before us, then we gain so much! Past years, and especially 2018, came with great challenges, but looking back I can see God working and accomplishing great things. Just look at the happy faces of our Rafiki kids! I hope you enjoy reading about our work in the attached newsletter.

Sara

I'm going to repeat myself:

Even when we want to play it safe, he's calling us to have courage and trust in him. Even as we cling to our familiar fears and anxieties, he's calling us to step out in faith and freedom. He's calling us to face our doubts and fears, to say Yes to following him no matter where it might take us.

Though for most of us following Jesus won't mean starting an orphanage in Uganda, or even visiting one. In fact, we don't need to travel any farther than our own community - neighborhood, school, work, church - to live the abundantly full lives Jesus calls us to.

In London there's a large prosperous downtown church that has three mission churches under its care that it had started. On the first Sunday of the New Year all the members of the mission churches come to the city church for a combined Communion service. The mission churches are located in the slums of the city, drawing a different population from the downtown church—thieves, burglars, and so on—but on this one Sunday they all knelt side-by-side at the Communion rail.

The pastor noticed that a former burglar was kneeling beside a Supreme Court judge—in fact, the very judge who had sent him to jail where he had served seven years. After his release this burglar had become a Christian. Yet, as they knelt there, the judge and the former convict, neither one seemed to be aware of the other.

After the service, the judge was walking with the pastor and said to the pastor, "Did you notice who was kneeling beside me at the Communion rail this morning?"

The pastor replied, "Yes, but I didn't know that you noticed."

The two walked along in silence for a few more moments, and then the judge said, "What a miracle of grace."

The pastor nodded in agreement. "Yes, what a marvelous miracle of grace."

Then the judge said, "But to whom do you refer?"

And the pastor said, "Why, to the conversion of that convict."

The judge said, "But I was not referring to him. I was thinking of myself. You see, it did not cost that burglar much to get converted when he came out of jail. He had nothing but a history of crime behind him, and when he saw Jesus as his Savior, he knew there was salvation and hope and joy for him. And he knew how much he needed that help.

But look at me. I was taught from my earliest days to live as a gentleman; that my word was to be my bond; that I was to say my prayers, go to church, and so on. I went through Oxford, took my degrees, was called to the bar and eventually became a judge.

Pastor, nothing but the grace of God could cause me to admit that I am a sinner on a level with that burglar. It takes much more grace to forgive me for all my pride and self-deception, to get me to admit that I am no better in the eyes of God than that convict that I had sent to prison."

Following Jesus leads to only one place - the foot of the cross where the ground is completely level. Because no matter who we are or where we've been, God calls us. In the middle of our exhaustion and

other plans, God calls us. In spite of our shortcomings, even after our failures, God calls us to risk going deep, even in over our heads.

But there - in a place where we have to trust Jesus, where genuine humility takes over, God's grace and sustaining and providing is in abundance beyond measure.

And there, we don't mend, tend or haul the net; rather by God's grace we become the net. God does the mending, the daily washing, and the morning-by-morning encouragement, so that others will see and be caught up as well.

Amen.