

Epiphany + 5C 2022

Luke 5:1-11, 1 Cor. 15:1-11, Isaiah 6:1-8
St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Franklin, TN

One summer when I was much, much younger, I spent two weeks with my grandparents at their home in Tampa, Florida. Now my Grandpa Jim was an avid fisherman. So, one day during my visit, Grandpa decided we, my grandpa, grandma and I, would go down to the pier and spend the day fishing together. Well, actually, it was more like my Grandpa Jim and I would fish, while my Grandma Carrie, who did not enjoy fishing, would sunbathe. So, off to the Tampa Bay pier we three went. After we had been there for several hours with nothing to show for our efforts, my avid fisherman Grandpa cast his hook into the bay waters yet one more time. Then, he called to my sunbathing Grandma and asked her to come relieve him for a spell while he took a break and got something to eat. No longer had he been gone and Grandma Carrie—who didn't know the difference between a lure and hook, an open-faced reel and a close-face reel—Grandma was laughing and reeling as she brought in a fish that must have been...THIS BIG!!

In today's Gospel reading, Simon Peter, avid fisherman that he is, after having fished all night long, trying every trick in the book, had nothing to show for his efforts. Nothing, not even one fish, not one! But then to the lakeshore came Simon's new friend, the rabbi, Jesus. He promptly recruited Simon and procured Simon's boat as an impromptu, floating pulpit from which Jesus preached to the people on shore.

Once his preaching had concluded, Jesus then asked Simon to turn his boat around, put out into deep water and let down his nets for a catch. Reluctantly, Simon the avid and very tired fisherman did as Jesus instructed. And no longer had the nets been cast into the sea than they

were filled with enough fish that two boats could barely hold them all. It was this miraculous catch of fish that served as the impetus for Simon, and James and John, to respond to Jesus call to join Jesus in the work of “catching people.”

Such a strange play on words, “catching people”. And yet it is this word play and the brief conversation surrounding it that turns everything around. Upon seeing this miraculous catch of fish, Simon Peter first said to Jesus, *“Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.”* Suddenly, Peter felt very unworthy being in the company of this rabbi and master now turned miracle worker and Lord, Jesus. Yet, remember according to Luke, Jesus is a friend of tax collectors and sinners! Far from judging Simon Peter’s degree of sinfulness or evaluating his worthiness, Jesus seeks to quickly dismiss such thoughts by saying to Simon Peter “do not be afraid.”

It’s as if Jesus is saying, *“I’m not consumed with your sinfulness, Simon. Don’t you be consumed by it, either.”* And it is at that point that Jesus uses this strange play on words, “From now on you will be catching people.”

I always assumed Jesus little word play had everything to do with Simon’s vocation as a fisherman. But, there is more to Jesus word play than meets the eye. You see, as a faithful Jew, Jesus would have been raised in and formed by the Jewish scriptures, our Old Testament, including the writings of the Prophets. So, in his encounter with Simon Peter, Jesus remembers the phrase “catching people” found in the prophets, specifically Jeremiah, Amos, and Habakuk. Only, according to these certain prophets “fishing for or catching people” refers **not** to God’s salvation but rather to God’s judgment: the unrighteous and unjust are caught and pulled up by hooks and nets God catching people in order to judge, condemn and punish them. But, Jesus co-opts this scriptural image of divine wrath — and turns

it around. With this simple wordplay he recasts God, from a fisherman hooking and catching people to punish them, to a fisherman catching people in order to heal them. And it's this recasting that turns around everything we humans have tended to think about God.

You see, from the beginning, we human ones, have sought to create gods in our image and attributed to those gods, human emotions. So that, since we are desirous, jealous and rivalrous toward each other thus the gods must be also. We scapegoat others, so the gods must also. We tend toward judging, condemning and punishing, so the gods-in-our-own-image must also. We experience anger, so the gods, the God of Israel included, must also be angry, wrathful gods. But, Jesus, God's Word made flesh, the true Image of God came to turn our wrong thinking about God around.

In response to Peter's shame and fear over the expectation of being judged as a sinner, Jesus seeks to quickly turn his way of thinking around. *"Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."*

How could we have missed this all these years? How could we miss such a major point in our relationship with God? I mean it is right there in all of our scripture readings for this morning. We can see it in Isaiah, who in response to the call to be a prophet says, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips..." Or, Paul, who in our second reading for today, describes himself as being "unfit to be called an apostle". And, of course, Peter, who declared himself a sinful man. In each case, whether it's Isaiah's trashy mouth or Paul's murderous ways, or Simon Peter's general sinfulness, God does not gather them up in nets of judgement and wrath. Their sin does not disqualify them. Their expectation of judgement and wrath is unfounded. Rather, God calls them into Divine relationship, calls them as prophet, evangelist and apostle.

In fact, God calls all people to God's self. All people! Not just the spiritual heavyweights, but all people, especially the lowly, the broken, the sinful. God in Christ Jesus, friend of sinners, simply calls on them to "turn their way of thinking around," literally to "repent", and invites them to be God's companion. Jesus turns the sinner's expectation of punishment around by embodying God's mercy with his presence, friendship, trust, and companionship along the way.

And what is true for them is true also for us. Jesus, whose healing and life-giving presence and love is for all people without exception, it's as if Jesus says to US today, "*do not be afraid. I'm not consumed with your sinfulness. Don't you be consumed by it, either. Instead, come receive God's mercy. And from then on you'll be catching people up in God's mercy.*"

After all, it is God's mercy that can turn this old broken world around.

And, beloved of God, that is no fish tale.