

Epiphany 5 C Sermon  
Luke 5:1-11  
February 6, 2022

*“Fishing for People?”*  
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*Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, ‘Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.’ Simon answered, ‘Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.’ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!’ For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.’ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.*

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As most of you know, I moved to Aurora from Wisconsin. At this time of year in Wisconsin, people love to go ice fishing. It may seem strange that anyone would want to sit out on the ice, fishing line dipped in a small whole cut into solid ice, hour after hour, but Wisconsinites do that. Beer is usually involved.

After knocking back a few, one Wisconsin ice fisherman drilled a hole in the ice and peered into the hole. He was startled when he heard a loud voice say, “There are no fish down there.” Perplexed, he walked several yards away, drilled another hole, and peered into the hole. Again, he heard a loud voice say, “There are no fish down there.” Dumbfounded, but still determined, the fisherman walked some yards away and drilled yet another hole. Again, he heard a loud voice say, “There are no fish down there.” Mystified, the fisherman looked up into the sky and asked, “God, is that you?” “No you idiot,” the voice boomed back, “it’s the rink manager.”<sup>1</sup>

I like to fish. I’m not good at it, but I enjoy it. There’s something almost meditative about sitting on the dock in the sunshine, pole in my hands, line trailing off into the depths, just waiting. A tug might come and if it does I’ll be ready. But if it not, I’ll just reel the line back in and cast out again. Once in a while though, the hook comes back bare—no bait and no fish. And that’s when I know that there’s an unusually clever critter lurking in the water robbing my worms. I’ll have to up the ante if I am to catch this one. The next worm goes on the hook more carefully. If that furtive fish feigns to bite down this time, I’ll be reeling him in and having fried fish for dinner!

It was fun to share my love of fishing with our nieces, Antoinette and Alexa, and our nephew, Levi, this past summer off the dock at Jericho Lake. The kids outsmarted the fish, discovering that if they let their lines drift under the dock, a little sunfish would inevitably bite. Both inches of those fish were delicious! Just kidding. We threw them back and likely caught them again!

I like to fish. I’m not good at it, but I enjoy it. And if I’m completely honest, I’m a little uncomfortable with the idea of fishing for people. The way I see it, fishers and marketing experts have much the same job. They both dangle something tasty in front of a potential catch and hope they

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted. “Joke 14019,” Unijokes.com, <https://unijokes.com/joke-14019/>.

bite. In either case, if the fish bites it ends up on a hook and then in a frying pan. If a person bites, they end up buying something they may not be able to afford or simply don't need. Thinking of ourselves, Christians, as fishers of people, feels a bit sinister.

Rick Warren, founder and lead pastor of Saddleback Church and prolific author of titles like "The Purpose Driven Life" says this about fishing for people:

"If you're going to be good at fishing, you've got to learn to think like a fish. If you're going to be an effective fisher of men, you've got to think like a lost person . . . To catch fish, you've got to know their habits, their preferences, and their feeding patterns. Certain fish like smooth water. Others are bottom crawlers. Some like rushing water. Others hide under rocks. You've got to know what the fish you're trying to reach like to do. If you're going to understand and reach non-Christians, you've got to begin with their mindset."<sup>2</sup>

I just can't help being put off by the idea that Christians are supposed to dangle the baited hook of faith in front of unsuspecting fish/people hoping to trick them into biting. Could this really be what Jesus meant? I'm going to say no—that is not what Jesus meant. So, what did he mean?

I believe that the keys to understanding what Jesus meant by this metaphor can be found in the verses that sandwich the story of the call of Peter, James, and John. Just before this episode, Jesus was preaching about the Kingdom of God to crowds of people. Other gospel accounts tell us that he told the people: "Repent (which means turn), for the kingdom of heaven has come near." For Jesus, the kingdom of God, or the realm of heaven, represented a hoped-for realm of peace and prosperity, justice and joy, liberation and love. The realm of heaven stood in direct opposition

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<sup>2</sup> Rick Warren. "To Catch a Fish, Learn to Think Like Them," Christianpost.com, October 7, 2021, <https://www.christianpost.com/article/20071020/to-catch-fish-learn-to-think-like-them/>.

to the empire of Rome, a realm of domination and deprivation, injustice for most and privilege for few, oppression and suppression.

“Like John [the Baptist], Jesus suggests that the [realm] of heaven is at hand . . . about to break in but has yet to arrive. Both John and Jesus make a connection between repentance and arrival of the [realm]. The [realm] of heaven is a state of affairs that will become a reality when people change their ways and work towards making it possible. People are asked to repent not so much to receive benefits of kingdom but to advance it for the benefit of others. They are invited to become agents of transformation,”<sup>3</sup> just as Jesus invited Peter, James, and John.

The metaphor of fishing for people is less about dangling a baited hook in the face of “lost” people and more about dragging a net through the water, catching people up in the possibility of a massive overhaul of the world—from the empire of Rome to the realm of heaven, that hoped-for future of peace and prosperity, justice and joy, liberation and love for all. If you wanted to catch people up in such a dream how would you do it?

In the verses immediately following this episode, Luke tells us that Jesus went on his way, teaching and healing as he travelled. That hardly sounds deceptive. If you want to catch people up in the net of heaven’s realm of peace and prosperity, justice and joy, liberation and love, what better way than to teach truth, to proclaim good news, to cure sickness and disease, to show people what is really possible. That’s what it looks like to fish for people. It looks like catching them up in the vision of heaven’s realm, to challenge the status quo, to cast a vision of what is possible instead of simply what is, and to enlist them in making it a reality for all.

Friends, that is exactly what we too are called to do. The Presbyterian minister James O. Chatham reminds us that “[f]rom the beginning, God *has called people*; God has stepped into their lives and pointed them

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<sup>3</sup> Raj Nadella. “Commentary on Matthew 4:12-23,” Workingpreacher.com, January 26, 2020, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-412-23-5>.

in new directions. God does this throughout the Bible; few pages go by without it. Is this not a strong signal that *God is going to call us too*; that in some moment when we are involved in a normal day's pursuits, God will walk up to the lake shore and beckon us to leave our fishing boats for a future we had not planned?"<sup>4</sup>

We are called. The church is called. This church is called to fish for people—to drag our net through the water and catch people up in the possibility of heaven's realm of peace and prosperity, justice and joy, liberation and love—right here, right now, for all. How do we do it? Just like Jesus did—by teaching truth where ignorance prevails, by proclaiming good news to those who are overwhelmed by bad news, by proclaiming gospel to those in power who ignore the people they are called to serve, by ministering to those who are hungry or homeless, sick, lonely, or hurting, and by proclaiming gospel to the people and systems that keep them hungry, homeless, sick, lonely, or hurting.

Fishing for people is not about baiting the hook and catching one for Jesus. It is about picking up the net and dragging it through the waters of day-to-day life until everyone is caught up in that vision of a better world, the realm of heaven—of peace and prosperity, justice and joy, liberation and love, right here, right now, for all. Until then, Jesus calls us to fish—calls *all* of us to fish. Let's pick up our nets. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> James O. Chatham. *Is It I, Lord?* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, pg.2.

