

Sermon on Luke 5:1-11  
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, February 7, 2010  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

If any of you has ever been fishing, one thing you most certainly have experienced has been *failure*. Because nobody catches fish every time they are on the water! Perhaps you are very good at fishing, with all the best equipment, and know a lot of good fishing spots. You may have caught thousands of fish in your lifetime, but one thing is for sure: if you've gone fishing more than once, there have been times when "the fish aren't biting." You've been "shut out", and gone home empty handed. You probably have experienced the feeling of failure and hopelessness at not having one bite on your line all morning, and so have gone back to shore, docked your boat, and called it a day. Have you ever had this happen to you? (I know it's not your fault, so go ahead, admit it! At some point in your life you have been a failure at catching fish!)

This is what Simon Peter had experienced, and must have felt, that day when he first encountered Jesus of Nazareth. Peter and his fishing crew had had a bad night of it, with neither of his boats finding any fish at all. So Peter and his men had beached their boats, and were washing their nets, when Jesus came along. He was being followed by a great crowd of people, who wanted to hear him preach. Jesus knew that he would be heard much better from the water, so he asked Peter to bring him out on his boat to speak. Peter obliged, and listened to Jesus' teaching for the first time that day. When Jesus was finished speaking, he told Peter to go out deeper and put his nets into the water to catch some fish.

Now, remember, Peter had just been out all night without catching a thing. He was an experienced fisherman; he knew fish, and he knew they weren't out there. What was the point, he wondered? Besides, Jesus was a carpenter, and a teacher; what did he know about fishing? But whatever Peter was thinking, he also knew that fishing can be a matter of luck and chance as well as skill. You never knew when a school of fish would come along. What was there to lose? So Peter said, "If you say so", and let down his nets. *And they caught so many fish that the nets were full to the point of bursting!* Peter called his partners to bring their other boat, and they filled both boats with nets full of fish that day! Full enough that they almost swamped their boats!

When Peter saw what kind of catch they had, he was amazed, and fell at Jesus feet. "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" He realized that Jesus was somebody special, with power from God. But Jesus said to him, "Don't be afraid! From now on you will fish for people!" And once Peter got to shore, he left his boats and his nets and followed Jesus.

Well, most of us have heard this story many times before. We can understand Peter's amazement at his change in fortune, when Jesus told him to go to deeper water and put out his nets for fish. But we may find it hard to relate to Peter's willingness to drop everything and follow Jesus. Who in their right mind does that? The decision of all his disciples to leave their homes, families, and livelihoods to follow Jesus is a mystery to us all. What made them do it?

But there is something we can all relate to: the feeling of failure and hopelessness that Peter felt after failing to catch any fish. Haven't we all been stymied sometimes at our attempts at success? Haven't we all failed at something, or fallen short of our hopes and expectations? Have you ever felt that way? I have, and it's not a good feeling. How does it feel to give up, and put up your boat on the shore because you can't do what you wanted to do?

So here's what I think the value is for us in this gospel lesson today: no matter how badly you and I feel when we think we have failed, when nothing we do seems to amount to anything or bring any good result, God has sent Jesus to say, "There's still hope! I will show you. Keep going, go out deeper, don't give up, because there are still fish out there!"

On a personal level, this is good news for us. We're not on our own, God is with us, and there is always hope. Even when you or I may be in the depths of despair, there's something out there for you, if you just keep looking for it. Listen for the voice of God, and he will lead you to an abundance of life that you might not believe is possible.

This is also good news for the Church. And this may be the real lesson behind the story. When we in the Church feel like we've failed in our witness, that there are no more persons willing to hear the gospel, and we're ready to give up on ever seeing our churches grow, Jesus comes with encouraging words that bring us hope. Jesus knows that there are human beings out there who long for some good news, and all we have to do is find them. We may have to go looking in places we've never thought to look, but they're there! If we search for them in the same places we've searched before, we'll probably not find them. We certainly won't find anyone if we give up, dock our boats, and stop looking. But Jesus would say that there's a whole world out there, full of people who long for, who need to hear the good news that there's a God who loves them. For all the people who are living in despair, God is reaching out with a word of hope and new life.

This is a word that churches like ours need so much to hear. It's easy for smaller churches these days to feel despair about the lack of numbers of people around us who seem to respond to our invitations or witness. We may wonder if there is any hope for our future. Some of our congregations have already given up, gotten out of their boats and walked away. But then we hear a story such as this, and its miraculous result, and we are greatly encouraged! Because God is telling

us in the Church not to give up, that there is a great abundance of human beings out there in the world who want and need to hear the good news. In these difficult economic times in our nation, there are many who need hope and encouragement, because they have lost their jobs or their homes. In our own community, there are many who suffer from hopelessness or depression, who struggle with chemical or alcohol addiction, people who are separated from their families, all who are searching for some kind of community, seeking acceptance and love.

Throughout the week at Redeemer, we have groups of people meeting here almost every night offering support for each other in recovery. We don't have to look very far, because they're already inside our church walls. We don't know yet whether they would consider worshipping with us on Sunday mornings, but maybe that's not the point! Maybe the first task for the Church is to offer a safe place of hospitality for those who are hurting, allowing groups of peers to offer support for one another in their journey. For that is what they truly need. Then perhaps, much later down the road, we will have built such a relationship that some of those seeking recovery will find, in this community of faith, a welcome and safe place to worship God. But this should not be our first and only priority. It is rather a possible long-term outcome. In the meantime, we are doing our job by opening our doors and offering hospitality for children of God who may have lost their way, and are trying to find their way home.

I think a possible message for the Church today is that we need to think "outside of the box", and try to reach out in new ways to new people, in uncommon places. There probably aren't many more German or Scandinavian Lutheran families out there looking for a Lutheran Church to transfer to! Not in this neighborhood! We need to start going out in deeper, uncharted waters! And so, in recent years, we have! We've opened our doors to broken people seeking recovery and reconciliation with their families through support groups. We've opened our church building up to families experiencing temporary homelessness by providing shelter and hospitality through Project Home. We've sought to reach out to people who are out of work by starting Daily Work ministry, to walk with them in overcoming their obstacles to employment. We help provide permanent housing for long term homeless adults, many suffering from mental illness or disabilities, across the street at Redeemer's Arms apartments.

This is not the same way our ancestors did ministry and outreach in the traditional Lutheran church, but so what? Isn't this what Jesus is calling us to do today, to reach out with love to the community in which we live? We are being the Church, responding to the very real hurts, needs, and hopes of the people living around us. It will probably take time before we build the trust and the relationship that result in many more people actually worshipping with us on Sunday mornings, but isn't the real call of the gospel to "love our neighbor as ourselves" and share

the good news of God's love with people who are suffering and in need – not only with prayer and with words, but with tangible acts of love, like sharing food, clothing, shelter, and a job? I think so, and there is a two thousand year tradition in the Church of ministry of compassion that shows that this is truly the work of the Church. So let us not despair in our calling, brothers and sisters, for in all of these things we are testing the deep waters to which our Lord Jesus has called us. And one day this Church will reap an abundant harvest, our nets will burst, bearing the fruit from the seeds of love that we are planting today, in Jesus' name. And in the meantime, we all might even catch a few fish! Thanks be to God! Amen.