

Sermon for 2-10-19
Gospel -- Luke 5:1-11
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"Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."ⁱ

Can you imagine being Simon Peter in that moment? This must have been the absolute last thing he wanted to hear. Simon and his friends have been fishing all night, they've caught nothing; they're physically and mentally exhausted, dejected and demoralized. Probably all they want to do in that moment is go home and sleep. But Jesus says, 'Go back out and let down your nets,' and even though it seems totally pointless, Simon does it.

And we know the rest of the story -- they catch a ton of fish, so much that the boats can barely hold it all; Simon Peter is amazed and afraid; and Jesus speaks his famous words: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."ⁱⁱ

{The older translations say "fishers of men," but we're more gender inclusive now.}

Simon Peter, James, and John have become People-Catchers.

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OK, gird your loins, friends, because now I'm going to bring up that scary E-word... evangelism. This story from the fifth chapter of Luke is one of the foundational texts for Biblical evangelism. So let's talk about evangelism. Evangelism is, literally, sharing Good News. Evangelism is not the same thing as church growth, although we like to conflate the two.

I'm also going to go out on a limb here and say that evangelism is not shouting from a soapbox (whether on a street corner or online); it's not shoving tracts or magazines at passers-by who are too polite to say no; it's not knocking on doors and listing for people all the many reasons they're going to hell; and it's not persuading anyone who isn't exactly like us how wrong they are.

That might be where our minds go when we hear the word evangelism, but none of those things are Luke 5 evangelism. None of those things are what Jesus asks for here: 'Go out into the water,' 'Let down your nets,' and 'Do not be afraid.'

If we're going to talk about evangelism, if we're going to understand what Christ's call to Simon Peter and James and John back then means for us in 2019, we've got to do some serious work. We've got to enter into this Gospel text, and wrestle with it. We've got to forget everything we think we know about Christian evangelism. And we've got to set aside our assumptions about the people around us, the ones we see but do not really know. Because no human being can ever reach out to another human being without first seeing them, and recognizing their true humanity.

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Let's try to see, to see and recognize, the people in this Gospel story. Not the ones we already know (Jesus and Simon Peter and James and John), but the others. The crowd of strangers. Verse 1 says that these folks were "pressing in on him to hear the word of God."

They don't know that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, but they do know that there is something in his words, his teaching, even his presence, that they desperately need. These strangers have come to hear the Word of God from this man (who is the Word Made Flesh, but they don't know that yet). They are hardworking, everyday people -- farmers, herders, craftsmen and women -- struggling to get by under the suffocating weight of Roman occupation. Their lives are not easy. And there are plenty of wandering teachers they could have gone to hear this day, plenty of voices telling them what to do and how to live, but they've come to hear Jesus.

Now let's leave those crowds behind for a moment, and let's try to see, to really see and recognize the crowds pressing in all around us. Not the ones next to us in the pews, not the people of other faiths, not the folks who are certain that there is no one or nothing more they need in their lives, thank you very much...

I'm talking about the people we encounter in our day-to-day lives -- at the grocery store, at work, in our families, on the street, at the coffee shop or the gas station - *- who are searching for something more.*

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Most of us are really good at moving through the world we share and just passing by each other, never pausing to look beneath the surface, never trying to go deeper, and certainly not considering another person's emotional or spiritual lived experience.

But if we did, if we made an effort to look beyond the superficial, to really know our neighbors, chances are we'd recognize them. We'd recognize their painful scars and anxieties over their own worth; we'd recognize their fear of the unknown and desire for assurance; we'd recognize their exhaustion and need for strength and encouragement; we'd recognize their sense of isolation and their heart's cry for authentic, loving, and meaningful relationship (we call that *communion*). We'd recognize these things because we have lived them too, and we revisit them from time to time, but we've found a solution, an antidote, the answer to our cries, the medicine for our souls in the person of Jesus Christ.

That's why we're here, isn't it? That's why we sing, that's why we pray, that's why we show up over and over again to listen and learn and explore and laugh and cry and celebrate and mourn and refresh our souls together as the living body of Christ in this place and time. Because Jesus gives us exactly what our souls so desperately need... some would call that *salvation*.

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Even though we're two thousand years and half the world removed from those crowds by the sea that day, they are us and we are them, because they sought and found in Jesus the same things we have found: wisdom and hope and healing, liberation and comfort and compassion, dignity and abundant love. These are the precious gifts he gives us and calls us to share. And when we share these gifts with the seekers around us; when we *live out* wisdom and hope and healing and liberation and comfort and compassion and dignity and abundant love, we are like walking billboards for Jesus Christ. **That's evangelism.** Evangelism is not an

action or an event, evangelism is an attitude and an orientation. Evangelism is **who we are** and **who we choose to be** in this world.

There are people in the world, in our community, in our families and neighborhoods and workplaces and schools and clubhouses and on our streets, who are searching for meaning and wholeness and peace that passes all understanding. If we can live into our call and manifest our truth and share the gifts Christ has given us with them, we will be doing exactly what Jesus asks: "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets."ⁱⁱⁱ

We have to put our complete trust in him, just as Simon Peter did; we have to listen and follow his instruction, just as the fishermen did; and we have to let go of fear. "**Do not be afraid**; from now on you will be catching people."^{iv} This is evangelism liberated from fear. No worries, no anxiety, no pressure; just trust and obedience and faith in God's abundant love.

We can do this. You and I can do this. Together, and with the help of the Spirit, we can share the abundant hope and peace and strength and newness of life we've found in Jesus Christ with the seekers all around us. We can invite people into blessed communion with their Creator and with one another. And when our message is not just words but transformed lives of love and generosity and compassion, it will be truly Good News. **Amen.**

ⁱ Luke 5:4

ⁱⁱ vs. 10

ⁱⁱⁱ vs. 4

^{iv} vs. 10