

Luke 5:1-11

When we left off last week, Jesus' neighbours had run him out of Nazareth. They even tried to hurl him off a cliff, but he gave them the slip and was on his way.

After being rejected in his hometown, Jesus went out into other areas of Galilee - preaching, healing, casting out demons. Everything he did and said showed that he really was fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy: "The Lord God's spirit is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me." Everywhere Jesus went, Jubilee was in bloom. The people heard good news, They were set free. They were healed. They found rest.

Back home, his neighbours had chased him out of town. By contrast, throughout the rest of Galilee, people were chasing after him, begging him to stay, grabbing his ankles like children who can't bear to be left behind. Jesus would have been extending God's hospitality to people who had been made to feel unwelcome. He would have been telling them they would be right at home with Father God. And the healings and exorcisms proclaimed the good news just as loudly as his preaching did ... probably even louder.

So, today we pick up on an early morning on the Galilean coast. Jesus is preaching to yet another standing-room-only audience. The crowd is packed all the way to the shoreline. Jesus looks around, sees some fishermen washing up their nets after a hard night's work. He climbs into Simon's boat and asks him to put out a little from the shore. Sitting there, he uses the boat as a pulpit and teaches the

crowd. When he finished, Jesus said to Simon, “Now go out where it is deeper and let down your nets, and you will catch many fish.”

So, imagine! - Simon and his business partners - James and John, sons of Zebedee - are professional fishermen. Fishing is their trade, their family business, their life’s work. They’ve been trained to fish by their fathers, just as Jesus was trained as a carpenter by Joseph. So, here’s a carpenter, telling a fisherman how to do his job. Put yourself in Simon’s place. You might be tempted to tell Jesus - “Look, I don’t tell you how to build your tables! And don’t forget, nets are for night fishing.”

Simon protests a little, mostly from frustration. Last night’s shift was a total bust. “Master, we worked hard all last night and didn’t catch a thing,” he tells Jesus. This was probably a very humiliating confession. After all, they’re professionals. Probably, all they really wanted to do was go home and sleep off the burden of their failure until the next evening.

But wait - it’s Jesus - the renowned preacher and healer, the one the crowds are chasing. So, reluctantly, he decides to shove off when Jesus tells him to shove off. “But if you say so,” Simon sighs. “We’ll try again.”

“If you say so,” spoken like someone with nothing left to lose, “If you say so.” “If you say so” is not exactly a bold affirmation of faith. “If you say so” - it’s sort of noncommittal. It’s the kind of thing you say when you’ve run out of options. Or when you really don’t believe the other person knows what they’re talking about, but you’re just too exhausted to argue with them about it.

Simon is worn out. He'd been working hard all night, and sat through a sermon - probably a rather lengthy one. Simon was discouraged. After all, they'd worked all night for nothing. But, "if you say so" is all Simon had in him, and a willingness to try something new, it was good enough - good enough to have him put down the nets.

And no sooner than the nets were lowered, they caught a huge haul of fish, straining the nets past capacity. They waved to their partners in the other boat to come help them. They filled both boats, nearly swamping them with the catch. It wasn't because Simon and his partners were such excellent fishermen. But this catch - which threatened to shred their nets and sink their boats - had absolutely nothing to do with their skill as fishermen. It was because Simon was with Jesus. Simon learned that the One who could gather large crowds, heal and chase away demons, could also chase boatloads of fish right into your nets.

And all it took from Simon was a half-hearted, "If you say so" - because half a heart was all he had to give. All it took from Simon was the willingness to push out into deep water and lower the nets, even if the whole time he was telling himself, "This is crazy! It will never work! Whoever heard of fishing in the daytime?"

And Simon was right. Of course it was crazy. It shouldn't have worked. The point of the story isn't that Jesus was a better fisherman than Simon. The point is that Jesus did something absolutely unexpected and wonderful with Simon. Even though all Simon had to offer at the moment was an empty net, and just a shred of ... faith? Hope? Desperation?

When Simon realized what had happened, he fell to his knees before Jesus and said, "Oh, Lord, please leave me - I'm too much of a sinner to be around you." He was completely overwhelmed by the size of their catch as were others who were with him. Upon hearing Jesus' teaching and participating in the miraculous catch of fish, Simon does not say something to the effect of, "What wisdom, power, and authority you have! Let me follow you. Send me out to do your will." Completely the opposite. Upon hearing Jesus' wisdom, and especially upon seeing his power and authority even over fish in the lake, Simon tries to send Jesus away.

Why did Simon call himself a sinner? Why did he think he couldn't handle Jesus' holiness? It's a common Biblical motif for a person to feel unworthy in the presence of the divine. Perhaps Simon had been told he was a sinner his whole life. Back then, the Jewish elite in Jerusalem tended to view all Galileans as tainted. Galilee was overrun with Gentiles, and half-pagans. Galileans often couldn't - or at least didn't - come to the temple in Jerusalem for worship and festivals. They didn't always have the means to make the sacrifices needed to make them ritually clean. So they were just written off as sinners.

But Jesus responded to Simon, "Don't be afraid! From now on you'll be catching people!" It's clear that Simon realizes he didn't really know Jesus. Something is disclosed in that moment as Peter witnesses the dramatic reversal of his experience of fishing all night with nothing to show for it. Jesus, it becomes immediately clear, is the one who can create abundance from scarcity. The one who can turn failure into success. The one who can, ultimately, create something out of

nothing.

Jesus, in other words, is the One. And Simon recognizes that in a flash of insight. And that recognition makes Simon ... what, exactly? Aware of his shortcomings, of his inadequacies, of his failure? In some measure, perhaps. But more important - Simon realizes - he is in the presence of the holy and eternal and he knows just how far he is from that. "Sinner," in this sense, doesn't simply designate Simon as a moral failure; rather, it signifies a qualitative difference between a mortal who is not yet what God created him to be and the One who is precisely and fully what God created him to be.

At heart, the word "sin" means "missing the mark," not necessarily a moral wretch and certainly not one despised by God or all of the other things we sometimes think "sin" designates. So what Simon is most keenly aware of in this moment is that he has missed the mark. His life is not what it could be, not what it should be, not what God hopes and intends it to be.

Framing "sin" in this way is valuable because it helps us to imagine God as more than a cosmic judge and eternal rule-enforcer. Rather, God is the one who loves God's creation and people, even when we miss the mark. God wants the best for us. God wants us to know that we are loved, that we enjoy God's favour, and God wants us to live into that identity and future.

That's why after Simon's exclamation Jesus doesn't respond by saying "Your sins are forgiven." Make no mistake. Forgiveness is a powerful and important theme

in the gospel, and Jesus will say that elsewhere. But at this moment Jesus responds to Simon's confession not with forgiveness but with comfort and with purpose. "Do not be afraid." This isn't judgment, it's mercy. And, "From now on you will be catching people." Jesus doesn't deny what Simon is – a fisherman – but, he enlarges it, meeting Simon where he is at and, rather than condemning him, expanding his vision, drawing him into God's kingdom vision of who and what Simon might be.

And Jesus is doing the same with us. Wherever you are right now, at this moment, you also have missed the mark. But rather than hear that as a word of condemnation, hear it instead as a word of love and invitation: *Do not be afraid*. From now on you will be drawn into a mission and purpose larger than you can imagine.

Luke wanted people who heard this story to identify with Simon. Simon was empty that morning when Jesus saw him. His boat was empty. His nets were empty. But most of all, he, Simon, was empty. And Jesus spoke to his emptiness when he told him, "Now go out where it is deeper and let down your nets, and you will catch many fish."

Many of us have an emptiness in us. Some frustration. A longing unfulfilled. A dream deferred. A sense of our failure or inadequacy. Even the church itself can become full of emptiness. And this story leads us to acknowledge that feeling of emptiness, so we can hear Jesus' invitation to us.

The German martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, famously said: *“Only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.”* ... The first step of obedience makes Peter leave his nets ... Only this new existence, created through obedience, can make faith possible. When Simon obeyed Jesus, Jesus began to fill his emptiness. After all, it was the nets bursting with fish that began to create faith in Simon, because he knew that this catch wasn't the result of his great fishing abilities. It was the result of his obedience to Jesus.

Even with the fullness Jesus had given him - the net bursting with fish, at first, Simon could still only see his own emptiness. “I'm too much of a sinner to be around you!” But Jesus told him: There is nothing to fear. From now on you'll be catching people. The decision to accept Jesus' invitation to follow, is a sensible one: they have witnessed evidence that Jesus is worthy to be followed, and as a result, they follow.

Jesus re-focussed Simon's vision on the nets full of fish - bursting at the seams - rocking the boat. It's as if he was telling Simon: “See how I filled your emptiness? There are so many empty people out there, feeling like you. Come with me, and help me fill them with grace and hope and life. Just like I filled your net.”

In the same way, this story turns our eyes from our own emptiness - our sense of failure or frustration or inadequacy - to Jesus' fullness. Like Simon, Jesus calls to us - as his disciples - as his church. Jesus calls us to push out into deep water and let our nets down for a catch.

The story of the church is reflected to some degree in this story itself. When Jesus calls, Simon is hesitant and thinks that what Jesus asks of him is both unnecessary and too demanding. Nevertheless, Simon responds, and he discovers that life has a surprise in store for him. By doing what Jesus asks him to do, he experiences an epiphany of God.

We are not called to do ministry alone. "A shout for help brought their partners in the other boat." Ministry is not to be a solitary journey but a community one. Solitary can be defined as individually alone, congregationally alone, or denominationally alone. We have to call on our partners in faith to work together to meet the needs of our communities, of our nation, of our world. We need to answer the call to follow Christ individually, but when we do, we become part of a much larger community, and then collectively we must also answer the call to follow Christ, gather our resources and work to build the community of Christ, meeting the needs of those God places in our path.

That means following Jesus obediently into the depths of discipleship. It means turning the other cheek, giving the extra garment, going the extra mile. Loving our enemies. Welcoming people who aren't like us. Forgiving seventy-seven times. Loving each other like Jesus loves us.

Jesus calls us to follow him into the deep emptiness of our world and our neighbours, stretching out the net of his saving love and power that allows us to become more and more what God created us to be. And with the power of love, we

are able to withstand pain and torment, and we are able to revel in joy and bliss. With love, we can endure great trials, face new challenges, and even overcome death. With love, we can help to heal the world that suffers and hurts greatly. With love, we can trust that God will provide all that we truly need. With love, we can invite people to join with us in revealing more and more of the miraculous power that is God. And even though we must acknowledge - like Simon - that we are often imperfect, that we miss the mark, we trust that when we push into the deep, it is Jesus who will fill the nets, who fills our emptiness, just as he did for Simon that morning.

Amen.