

A Whopper of a Fish Tale

Sunday, February 6, 2022

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Sermon Text: Luke 5:1-11

One of the things I love most about Central Texas is the water. I know that some of you probably are thinking, “What water?” if you are from Minnesota or Florida or Washington, but for a West Texan, this is a lot of water. There are TWO lakes within 10 miles of my house and at least TWO rivers! While I just enjoy hiking around the water, many people enjoy using our waterways for fishing. I am not much of a fisherman myself; there’s not much fishing to be had in the Permian Basin! However, I do know from observation that fisherman love to talk about the biggest fish they have caught or the “one that got away”. I think fisherman love to tell these stories to bond and have a little one upmanship of who can tell the tallest tale. It makes for great entertainment value! But I think the apostle Simon Peter has everyone beat. Let’s hear his story today in Luke 5:1-11.

5 Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God,² he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.³ 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.⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”⁵ Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.”⁶ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.⁷ So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”⁹ For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken;¹⁰ 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.” ¹¹ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

This is the first time we see Jesus interacting face to face with the disciples in the Gospel of Luke, but Simon has already met Jesus. The lectionary text skips the section where Jesus stays at the house of Simon and heals his mother-in-law. Jesus then left Simon’s house and went around preaching and healing. Now Jesus is back beside the lake of Galilee and guess who Jesus encounters again? His acquaintance Simon. And since the crowd is pressing in on Jesus, making it difficult to teach, Jesus commandeers Simon’s boat to get to a better place to be heard.

Now when Jesus encounters Simon this second time, Simon’s not having a good day. It’s the end of a long night shift working and Simon has absolutely nothing to show for all his efforts. We’ve all had work or school days like that where we feel like we’ve spent all day working but accomplishing nothing. Those kind of days feel terrible, don’t they? They sap our energy and attack our self-esteem. In addition, Simon likely was working from day-to-day to make the money to feed his family and we know from earlier in Luke that the family included his mother-in-law. This day of failure likely meant Simon would come home with no money to put food on the table, with at least two disappointed faces awaiting him. No one providing for their family wants to have that feeling.

Yet along comes Jesus, not only asking to use the boat for his pulpit, but asking Peter to take the boat back out on the lake and keep fishing! Doesn’t Jesus know how tired and disappointed Peter is? Surely, he can see that Peter is not heading to market with his catch? Doesn’t Jesus see the lines of fatigue and bags under the eyes on Simon’s face and his sagging, tired shoulders? Don’t you see me, Jesus? I would bet we’ve all felt this at least once in our lives.

Despite his tiredness and reluctance, Peter goes ahead with Jesus’ requests, while also adding that he thinks the whole endeavor will be a failure just like it has been so far. I know I’ve felt this. “I’ll do what you say, Jesus, but you have to know I don’t think it will work.” And Jesus

works with what Simon gives him. Even when we are tired, worn out, and discouraged, Jesus will work with our obedience to produce something great!

And it does turn out great for Simon! I did a little bit of investigation and math to find out just how much this amazing fish catch would earn for Simon. I used the description of the type of fish most often caught in the Sea of Galilee (a tilapia appropriately called St. Peter's fish) and the size of a 1st century fishing boat unearthed from the shores of Galilee in 1986 to determine that to fill two 1st century boats with fish would take approximately 55,728 fish. Using that number of fish multiplied by the average wholesale price of tilapia would yield a total value of \$49,876.56! Jesus has just given Simon amounts to an entire year's salary for many people! Jackpot!

Yet, Simon's reaction to this sudden windfall is very different from what we would expect. He doesn't leap in the boat with joy. He doesn't cry with happiness. He doesn't even say thank you. He tells Jesus to leave! Why? There are so clues in the original Greek. Greek is a language in which word order often indicates importance and the verb "see" is first word in verse eight. Simon truly SEES who Jesus is. He has an epiphany of Jesus as God; as the one worthy of the title, Lord. And he recognizes his sinfulness. He sees just how far he is from the power he has just witnessed. He feels completely unworthy to even be in the presence of one so holy.

And how does Jesus react? Does he berate Peter for his sinfulness? Remind him just how bad he is? Ask for a full list of confessions? No! Jesus simply tells Simon to not be afraid. The judgement of Jesus upon the sins of Peter is to assure him and give him a new focus in life. It is the same for us. When we recognize Jesus as who he is as Lord of our lives, his response to us is always love, not judgement. As we are reminded elsewhere in the Scriptures, "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive" (1 John 1:9) and "There is no condemnation to those who are in Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Let us truly take the words to heart from Jesus to not be afraid! We are free!

From Simon's freedom, Jesus gives new purpose. From now on, Simon will "fish for people." The Greek here more literally means "catch alive." Peter has been captured in awe of

Jesus; he and his companions leave the boats full of \$50k of fish behind! Peter is captivated by his new purpose in life: to bring others to Jesus that they too may be captured alive and be made new by Jesus' healing power. Peter has a whopper of a fish tale to share!

Don't we all have tales of the amazing things that God has done for us? We don't have to have a fancy theology degree or understand everything about God to tell others about God. We only have to speak to what God has done in our lives. Let's go out and share those whopper tales with the world!