

Luke 5:1-11 — 5 Epiphany Year C—February 9, 2025

Imagine Peter's surprise when Jesus, who had been teaching the people near the Lake of Gennesaret, simply climbed into his boat and asked him to push out a bit into the water. After working all night with nothing to show for it, Peter had been washing his nets, pulling out the seaweed and branches and other debris. The gathering of people kept pushing up against Jesus to hear his words more clearly, and amidst all the jostling, he kept getting closer and closer to the water's edge. The boat was the best available option. I hope this slightly amused Peter rather than annoyed him that this teacher, this rabbi, would have the chutzpah to climb into his boat without asking.

After Peter pushes the boat out, Jesus continues teaching. And Peter is a captive audience, which might have been Jesus' intention all along. Peter likely had more work to do on the boat—things to wipe down, ropes to coil—but he would certainly be listening to Jesus' words.

When he finishes teaching, Jesus turns his attention to Peter and tells him to head out into the deep water for a catch of fish. I can assure you this caught Peter off guard. He was the professional fisherman, and Jesus was a rabbi. He would have likely given him the same look the mechanic gives you when you tell him what you think is wrong with your car. But something about Jesus—maybe his words or the way he just climbed into that boat or simply the way he held Peter's gaze—something caused Peter to look at this teacher and say, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." He then points the boat toward that deeper water and sets out, eventually putting the nets he had just cleaned back into the lake.

Luke writes, "When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break." Pandemonium ensues. Fish flopping all over. The boat creaking under the strain and tilting heavily to the one side. Peter signals to his partners—James and John—who are still onshore, and they immediately head out to help. Once they get there and bring up the nets, the fish fill both boats to capacity, and they begin to sink.

That's when Peter regains his senses. He's probably been working in overdrive without really thinking—years of instincts kicking in. But in finally seeing the sinking boats and the multitude of fish and this teacher still in the boat with him, he puts it all together. Peter's overwhelmed by it all and falls down before Jesus, "Go away from me, Lord, for, I am a sinful man." Jesus looks down at him with compassion, "Don't be afraid," he says, "from now on you'll be catching people." Nothing else is said, and they head back to shore. When they arrive, Peter gets out of the boat and leaves it all behind—the nets, his livelihood, and that unbelievable catch of fish—he simply follows Jesus. He's caught.

As a clergy person, I get asked from time to time to share the story of how I got called into ministry. I tell them about the paper I wrote back in second grade for Mrs. Sears about what I wanted to be when I grew up, and the summer I spent playing church giving

my parents Ritz crackers and grape juice. Every clergy person has just such a story in her back pocket.

But the same isn't always true for people who sit out in the pews. If I were to ask someone at coffee hour to tell me about how God called them, I suspect that some would be caught off guard. They might look at me a little amused wondering what I was up to, just like Peter with Jesus in the boat. Or perhaps they'd feel like they'd been out all night working hard and have nothing to show for it, and, as one commentator put it, they're face to face with their limits and just ready to give up. And at that point, when we've struggled and begun asking the questions if what we're doing is really worth it, Jesus enters our story and asks us to push out into deeper water. He invites us to lay aside our "penchant for the predictable and the routine" in order to "venture into new ground or new depths."¹

It's always an invitation from Jesus, never a demand. Always a way that can bring us to new places full of life if we just have the faith to trust and push out into deeper water. If we can just leave the presumed safety of the familiar behind.

A church consultant I worked with years ago, often asked the gathering of churches and religious groups he helped if they would be willing to give sacrificially of their lives for the greater good. "Yes!" is often the resounding response. "Absolutely!" And then many times there'd be a side note, someone who said, "But my church never asks me to do this." People are willing, but they are never invited. They might feel what could be described as a call—or maybe even a desire for a call—but where that leads is not clear.

It's so easy to understand why Peter wants Jesus to leave, isn't it? He's there in the boat with this unbelievable catch of fish, and he recognizes that Jesus is so much more than he first imagined. How can you measure up to someone like that? He's overwhelmed and scared and sees that he has little to offer. He's just a fisherman. "Go away, Jesus. I can't be near you; I'm a sinner." "Don't be afraid," Jesus says. "You might not think you have what it takes, you might be overwhelmed in my presence, but do not fear. Don't be overcome by that type of thinking. From now on you'll fish for people."

Except he doesn't say "fish," does he? He says "catch," although most translations of Luke you'll read out there still say "fish." When you fish you pull out a creature that will likely end up on a dinner plate. But Luke uses the Greek word *zogreo*, which literally means "catch living ones," the prefix coming from *zoe* or "life." Jesus wants Peter to catch people, but they will be full of life. The call Jesus gives is to bring people in as his followers, so they too can participate in the life-giving work of his kingdom.

Friends, clergy aren't the only ones whom Jesus calls; he calls us all. Peter didn't think he had anything to offer, yet Jesus found him. He went to his workplace and called this one without a seminary degree to go out and catch people with God's love. I think most

¹ *Feasting on the Word* Year C Volume 1, pg. 334.

of us believe that we don't have much of anything to offer for Jesus' kingdom, yet he simply says, "Don't be afraid." And then he looks at us and continues. "From now on you'll be catching people full of life." Or, if Peter were a doctor, Jesus would have said, "From now on you'll be healing the soul." Or if he were a mechanic, "You'll be getting people back on the road to life." From now on, you'll be about the work of my kingdom. From now on your life will be for a greater good.

What about us? Can we hear that call and give our lives for so much more? Can we take our place alongside those who have been found by Christ in order to change the world with his love? Can we leave everything behind—our fears and insecurities in our skills, our reluctance, our fondness for the routine—can we leave it all and follow Jesus?

As your new bishop, I've heard a resounding "Yes!" to that from many people that I've talked to. But there's an uncertainty on how to do that. How to live as 21st century disciples. Part of it is because our church lives have come to focus more on budgets and getting things done and finding people for leadership positions than on hearing anew the stories of our faith and what they might mean for us and how we might then share that good news with others. We do not frequently discuss or take up spiritual practices that have shaped the lives of those who have followed Jesus on the way because we're too busy doing other things. Good things, mind you. Yet those tasks have become the focal points of our church life. The kinds of things that get more airtime at the vestry or bishop's committee meeting. It's our way of cleaning the nets and wiping down the boat and whatnot.

And Jesus looks around at all that—he gets into the boat, he enters into our buildings—and says, "Go deeper." Push out from the status quo. There are people to be caught. A lot of them. So many it'll start bursting the nets. But it takes moving out from the shallows.

In April, I'm beginning a three year journey with our diocese focused on becoming contemplative disciples. I'll be sharing short teaching videos introducing a spiritual practice every other month and inviting you to engage with it. To spend time at leadership meetings talking about it. Reading a Bible passage together. Trying on a new way of going deeper in our faith. We'll have resources of things like articles and books and films to suggest, and provide a framework for small group gatherings too, and we'll also discuss these at our governing bodies' gatherings. This discipleship project will be three years as that was length of time the earliest Christians used to prepare new converts for baptism. This isn't a requirement, of course; it's an invitation. For the people who make up our Diocese to put out into the deeper water and to let down our nets. To venture out onto new ground.

"Don't be afraid," Jesus says to Peter in that boat, and he says it to us. "Do not give in to fear. From now on you'll be catching people." The invitation is there. The question simply is will we choose to leave everything behind and follow him, or will we simply stay there at the dock?

Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Philip N. LaBelle given at Clergy Conference and invited to be shared in the parishes of the Diocese of Olympia on February 9, 2025. Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Philip N. LaBelle given at Clergy Conference and to be shared in the parishes of the Diocese of Olympia.