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The Gospel of Luke
XIII. Jesus the Fisherman
Luke 5:1-11

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Simon Peter owed Jesus a favor. Remember last week we read how Jesus had healed Peter's mother-in-law¹ – and the returning of favors was a very important part of the social customs of that time and place. Such that when Jesus, faced with an overflowing crowd on the beach, steps into Peter's fishing boat and asks Peter to row out a little bit from the shore, Peter must oblige Him. This required more than a little effort on Peter's part, however. Remember that he had been out fishing all night and was no doubt exhausted. And to put out into that lake, even a little way, would have required Peter to row the boat continuously to keep it from drifting. But Peter does so without a word of complaint. And Peter's boat becomes an excellent pulpit for Jesus to continue teaching the crowd. That section of the lake rose up somewhat quickly from the beach, meaning it formed a natural amphitheater for the crowd to be able to see and hear Jesus preach.

But it is what Jesus requests of Peter once the preaching is done that must have really annoyed Peter. In fact, if we listen carefully enough we can hear the annoyance in Peter's reply to Jesus' request. *"And when he had finished speaking,"* writes Luke, *"Jesus said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.'"* Peter, remember, was a professional fisherman. He did this for a living. He was the son of a fisherman. He kept his family fed through his skill as a fisherman. He knew that lake like the back of his hand – where the spring waters fed into its depths, where the fish congregated and when. And one thing Peter knew was that the time to catch fish in this lake was at night, not mid-morning – and that the place to catch fish was near the shore, not out in the deep. And, to add insult to the injury of Jesus' request, Peter had just completed an unsuccessful night of fishing. He was tired. He was frustrated. He was in no mood to entertain stupid fishing advice from a carpenter, no matter how big a favor he owed to Him.

And all of that shows up in the tone of Peter's reply to Jesus' ridiculous request. *"Master,"* he starts out – but right there we can hear his irritation, because the title he uses for Jesus is not really as respectful as it sounds in English. It is more like, *"Okay, Boss"* or *"If you say so, Chief."* And then he follows that with this: *"We toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets."* So what Peter is actually saying to Jesus in response to His request is something more like this:

Listen Teacher! My boys and I are professionals. We know where the fish feed – it's along the shore, and the best time to

*catch them is at night. That's why we were out on the lake all last night. We're not stupid! We have just worked the fishing areas and caught nothing. We are now dead tired, and I have stayed awake a few more hours – to serve you. You rabbis think you know everything and now you order me to fish during the day in deep water. Very well! Let's go out and we'll see who knows what about fishing!*²

If only what happened next had not happened, Peter would have been able to tell the tale for years to come of that time he had showed up that smarty-pants rabbi in front of everybody. But the strangest thing happens. Peter throws the net into the deep water, no doubt doing so in a sarcastic manner – if it is possible to throw a fishing net into the water in a sarcastic manner. And, lo and behold – fish! And not just fish – more fish than Peter has ever caught in his life, more fish than Peter had ever dreamed of catching in his life. It was like winning the lottery – so many fish filling the net that the boat was in danger of being swamped. There is a fun little note in what happens next: Peter and his assistant “signal” the other boat to come join them as fast as possible. Notice that he signals instead of calling for them – Peter’s first response to this great catch of fish is to make sure that this new secret fishing hole doesn’t get discovered by anyone else. If he yells out to the shore, his voice would carry and who knows who might hear and try to horn in on Peter’s new spot. Sounds just like a fisherman, doesn’t it?

But when the other boat joins in trying to haul in the net, even that boat is overwhelmed by the size of the catch. And slowly, as the water begins to lap over the sides of the heavily laden fishing boats, slowly it begins to dawn on Peter that this catch is not simply because he has accidentally found the fishing hole of all fishing holes. Rather it begins to dawn on him that this catch has everything to do with the carpenter standing in the boat beside him. It dawns on Peter that the size of this catch, the timing of this catch, the location of this catch all point to a supernatural rather than a natural explanation. It begins to dawn on Peter who this carpenter must actually be. And Peter falls to his knees, right there in the boat – fish flopping all around him. “*Lord!*” he says. Gripped by that mixture of terror and astonishment that the Bible calls “awe”, he falls to his knees and he cries out, “*Lord, depart from me, for I am a sinful man.*”

Peter’s instincts in this are right on target. For a sinner to stand in the presence of the Most High God is to court immediate death. No sinner can look upon the glory of the Lord and expect it to end well. Isaiah, given his vision of the glory of the Lord in the Temple in Jerusalem, immediately responds by crying out in terror, “*Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!*”³ That same fear springs immediately from the lips of Peter: “*Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.*”

The only way a sinner can stand in the presence of God and live is if, by some miracle, God has come to that sinner to show mercy, to take what is unclean and make it clean, to take what is marred by sin and make it holy. Jesus looks down upon Peter, this sinful fisherman trembling at His feet. And Jesus says to him: “*Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.*” They row the boats back to the shore, that huge catch of fish piled up in the

bottom. And when they get to the shore, Peter – and James and John, from the other boat, with him – leave everything and begin following after Jesus.

And with that, we, reading this story, now begin to see two things about it more clearly. One, that the so-called “miraculous catch” of this story is not that great mass of fish hauled up by the nets from out of the depths of the sea. Rather the miraculous catch is none other than Peter himself – hauled up from out of the depths of human sinfulness by the love and mercy of Jesus Christ. And second, we see the great truth that Jesus, the carpenter, is in fact the greatest fisherman this world has ever known. With a fisherman like Jesus there will simply never be any tale of the “one that got away.” If Jesus has His eye set on a fish, it is a sure thing that fish sooner or later will end up caught.

Which is Good News for all of us. “*Do not be afraid,*” Jesus says to the sinner trembling at His feet in the bottom of the boat – “*Do not be afraid.*” For here, in this story, we see the great truth of the Gospel that Jesus has come into this world precisely in order to haul up sinners like Peter, and like you and me – haul us up into the boat of His redeeming love. Jesus the fisherman – Jesus the fisher of humankind. Jesus the One who comes to us when the conditions are just right and catches us up in the net of His mercy. We were lost but now we are found. We were blind but now we see. We were drowning beneath the weight of so many worries and regrets, mistakes and misdirections; drowning beneath the weight of too much yesterday and not enough tomorrow; drowning beneath the weight of so much in our lives that just was not the way it was supposed to be, and for which we had lost all hope of repair – and then suddenly there He was, hauling us up into the joy of His salvation. Saying to us all the while, “*Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid, anymore.*”

The great preacher, Fred Craddock, tells of an encounter with an acquaintance in Atlanta. This acquaintance was a businessman with a typical religious history: grew up in the church as a kid, dropped it as irrelevant as an adult. But now he had come to a crossroads because he had messed up, and had been messed up for a long time – and it had now cost him just about everything that mattered to him. As the conversation went on, Craddock drew him back to how he had lost his faith:

He said, “Well I guess I came to doubt.” I said, “What doubt? Doubt in the existence of God?” He said, “Oh no, no. I think I came to doubt what the church was saying . . . I think I came to doubt that it was possible for a person really to be forgiven and begin a new life.” I said, “It’s true, it’s true, you can.” He said, “Really” Do you believe it?”

And he began to talk to me about his life and his need to turn a corner and begin anew. He had lost so much, including wife and children and business. “It is really true?” I said, “Yes, it’s true.” He acted as though the message of the Christian faith had just come from Mars and I got to wondering later. Are there a lot of people in the world who really do not think that it is true? . . . The message the Bible presents . . . It comes in a lot of figures of speech. Sometimes it’s called a New Creation, just imagine that,

first day of the history of the world . . . Everything new, New Creation.

Sometimes it's spoken of as a New Birth, like a new baby, guilty of nothing, brand new, fresh. Father, mother, uncles, aunts, looking through the glass in the nursery at the new baby . . .

This fellow said, "Is that true?" I said, "It's true, it really is true" . . . Countless millions of people will tell you it is true.⁴

Mercy. Grace. Forgiveness. A new start, a clean slate, a new beginning, a new life.

Jesus the Fisherman. Jesus the Fisher of Men and Women – ever at work in this world to bring us into His salvation. And not only this, but also calling us to join Him in this work. *"From now on,"* He says to Peter, *"you will be catching men."* The Greek word here translated "catch" means, more precisely, "to take alive, to rescue". *"From now on,"* Jesus says to Peter and to us, *"now that I have caught you, from now on I will be using you to catch others. From now on, you will be catching others and making them alive, rescuing them, in my name."*

Certainly, that is precisely what Jesus did through Peter. We would not be here today had Peter not proven to be such a good fisher of men in Jesus' name. Remember how several thousand were saved the very first time Peter preached a sermon, on the day of Pentecost. Remember how it was through Peter that God made it clear to the church that the Gospel was meant also for everybody, not just for a select few. God used Peter again and again to fish people out of their sin and despair, and to haul them into the light and love of Jesus Christ.

And now God would do the same with us. Because all around us, every single day, are people who are falling into hopelessness and despair; people who are drowning under the burden of their accumulated failure and guilt. People who have cast their nets into the waters of life again and again – only to keep coming up empty. Loving these people, wanting these people to know Him and His salvation, Jesus turns to Peter and to you and to me and He says, *"In my name, and for my sake, put out from the shore and go fishing!"*

A young clerk at a religious bookstore arrived early one morning to find a man waiting for the store to open. He seemed polite, and evidently needed something right away. So, she let him in, even though the store was not scheduled to open for another hour. She opened the door, turned on the lights, and said to him, *"Do you need any help finding anything?"* He looked at her, and very hesitantly, said to her, *"Yes. I want to know about Jesus."* She led him to the section of the store dedicated to all sorts of books about Jesus and started to walk away and leave him to his search. But he called after her: *"No. I want to learn about Jesus the Savior. Don't show me any more books. Please, will you tell me about Him?"*⁵ *"Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men."*

Sitting at a Starbucks, sinking down in a cushiony chair, newspaper in one hand and coffee in the other, another Christian was enjoying a peaceful start to his day. A woman he did not know was seated across from him. He had smiled and nodded as he had set down. After about ten minutes, she interrupted his reading. *"Excuse me,"* she said, *"do you mind if I ask you a question? Do you believe in God?"* He said he did. *"Do you believe in the Bible?"* He said

he did. “*Do you believe in hell?*” she asked. From there the conversation went into deeper waters. The woman was in a rough place and was searching for something – and she had figured out that Jesus and His Church were what she was searching for. But her only experience of Christians were the angry and judgmental voices she had encountered in her childhood and in the media. He told her that at his church she would be welcome – that at his church the focus was not on who is going to hell, but rather on the promise Jesus has made to us of heaven; a focus not on judging sinners, but upon how the love of Christ comes to rescue all of us sinners from judgment. He invited her to come and see for herself the following Sunday.⁶ “*From now on you will be catching men.*”

Jesus the Fisherman. Jesus the greatest Fisherman this world has ever known. He caught us. Hauled us up into the embrace of His mercy. And through a bunch of sinners like Peter, and like you and me, He is fishing still – until at last He has caught this whole world in His redeeming love.

¹ Luke 4:38-39.

² Kenneth E. Bailey, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p. 142.

³ Isaiah 6:5.

⁴ “Have You Heard John Preach?” in Fred B. Craddock, The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), pp. 114-115.

⁵ Thomas G. Long, Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), p. 21.

⁶ Stephen P. Bauman, “A Small Starbucks Conversation,” sermon preached at Christ Church, NYC, on May 14, 2006, accessed on-line on March 1, 2012.