

**SCRIPTURE TEXT:** Luke 5:1-11

**SERMON TITLE:** Casting Nets

Well, it seems to me that if we've decided to follow Jesus, we're in the fishing business! No matter what other responsibilities we may have in life for family or work, when we decide to follow Jesus our priority becomes casting nets to catch people.

In the Greek, the phrase *catching people* literally means *to save men and women alive*. As one commentator has noted, *The kingdom requires not dead fish, but human beings fully alive—not creatures writhing in the last gasps before death, but people living the life of the good news in all its fullness.*<sup>1</sup> This is the kind of *fishing business* we're in.

Now I realize that in this morning's story, when Jesus says, *from now on you will be catching people*, he's talking only to Simon Peter. But it's also clear to me through the rest of Luke's gospel and into volume 2 of his work, the book of Acts, catching people is a responsibility not just of Simon Peter or the other apostles—it's a responsibility of all of us who follow Jesus.

In Luke's gospel, for example, Jesus sends out, not just Peter, but all twelve apostles on a missionary journey to cast nets for the kingdom by exercising authority over demons, curing diseases, healing the sick and proclaiming the good news. Later Jesus sends out seventy others and gives them authority to cure the sick and to announce the nearness of God's rule. By the time we get to the second chapter of the book of Acts, many people are awestruck at the signs and wonders done by the apostles, but it's only after Luke describes the kind of community formed by Jesus' disciples that he adds the sentence: *And day by day the Lord added to their*

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<sup>1</sup> "Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany." *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word*. Ed. David L. Bartlet and Barbara B. Taylor. Year C ed. Vol. 1. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009. 332. Print.

***number those who were being saved.*** The point is that all of us who have decided to follow Jesus are in the fishing business.

Now having spent a lifetime in the church, and the last 30 years or so working in the church, it seems to me that many of us who follow Jesus are, at the very least, ambivalent about this fishing business. We acknowledge the call, but then we only pay it lip service, while neglecting to do the work of casting nets out for the kingdom.

Let me tell you a story. There was once a group of people who were really sold on the idea of fishing. To hear them talk, you would think that these folks had more experience at fishing than anyone else around. They claimed to be in the fishing business. And it sounded like a good business to be in because there were many fish in the waters all around them. In fact, the whole area was surrounded by streams and lakes just filled with fish. And the fish were hungry.

So week after week, month after month, and year after year, these folks gathered in meetings and talked about their call to fish, about the abundance of the fish, and about how they might go about fishing. They were always on the look out for new and improved fishing techniques. Not only that, but they were constantly at work to refine their definition of fishing.

And they promoted fishing. They loved slogans: ***United We Fish! Life is Short...Fish Hard. Cleanliness May Be Next to Godliness; But Fishing IS Godliness!*** They sponsored special campaigns like the ***Let's Go Fishing*** campaign. They sponsored costly national and international events to discuss fishing and to promote fishing.

These folks built large and beautiful buildings called ***Fishing Headquarters***. Their plea was for everyone to go fishing! But you know what? None of these people ever went fishing! They talked about fishing. They studied fishing. They promoted fishing. But they didn't fish.<sup>2</sup>

This sounds like a lot of the churches I've known. So what is that keeps us from fishing

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<sup>2</sup> Robinson, Darrell W. *People Sharing Jesus*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995, 21-23. Print.

for people? Maybe we feel inadequate or unworthy like Simon Peter. After all, it is an awesome thing to be invited to share in the kingdom work of Jesus Christ.

Do you remember what Simon Peter did and what he said? He fell down at Jesus' knees and he said to him: ***“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”*** Eugene Peterson's translation of this phrase in *The Message* goes like this: ***“I'm a sinner and can't handle this holiness. Leave me to myself.”*** Is this what keeps us from catching people?

Well, Jesus doesn't want our fear of inadequacy or unworthiness to stand in the way—so he says to us what he said to Simon Peter: ***Don't be afraid. I have work for you. Catch people.*** This kind of experience with Jesus can change everything for us just as it did for Simon Peter. In fact, there was such a change for Simon in the course of this story that Luke actually changes his name from Simon to Simon Peter in the middle of the story.

But look, maybe this kind of fear is not the issue. Maybe we're hung up on size issues. You know, if we're interested in keeping the church small, this is a troublesome story. The story begins with a crowd of people pressing in on Jesus to hear the word of God. They've got him backed up to shoreline of the lake of Gennesaret. When we move beyond paying lip service to fishing for people and actually start doing the hard work of casting nets for the kingdom, we can expect to deal with crowds.

And then the story tells us about this extraordinary catch of fish that Simon pulled in after he left the shallow waters and went out into the deep at Jesus' command. Simon was skeptical because he and his partners had been fishing all night and had caught nothing, but he did what Jesus commanded and the result was a catch of fish so great that Simon's nets were beginning to break. When his partners came over to help, there were so many fish that both of their boats began to sink.

This is what happens when we start catching people—when we cast nets for the kingdom. People are caught up in the way of Jesus and drawn in to the kingdom of God. If we don't want to grow—then we won't fish for people. We may talk about fishing for people, but we won't fish. But this is not the way of Jesus so I guess we had better come to terms with growth.

There's one more thing about this fishing business. To catch people, we need to be in the deep water—not in the shallow water. In the Old Testament, the image of deep water signifies chaos as in the opening verses of Genesis: *the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.*

To catch people, we're called to leave the shallow waters where life is secure and relatively comfortable, and we're called to move into the places of chaos where people's lives are at risk—even where our lives are at risk. We're to cast our kingdom nets of mercy and justice into the deep waters—just as Jesus did—where people are poor, and weak, and vulnerable, and sick, and suffering, and oppressed and forgotten. This is our business.

Well, it seems to me that if we've decided to follow Jesus, we're in the fishing business! No matter what other responsibilities we may have in life for family or work, when we decide to follow Jesus our priority becomes casting nets to catch people. For Simon Peter, James and John, this meant leaving everything to follow Jesus. The question is: What does this mean for us and how will we respond?