

**St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)**

**Trinity 5 – July 9, 2023**

**Luke 5:1-11 – Fish in the Boat**

**Pastor Peter Wagner**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The fish is a symbol of the Christian. The boat is the ark of Christendom, the church. The only true catcher of men is Christ Jesus, who calls apostles and pastors as his fishermen. Speaking through their mouths, Christ uses the good net of the gospel – preaching Christ crucified – to enclose fish and draw them out of deep water, out of the depths of perversion and unbelief. He draws them into his boat, his holy church.

Over the centuries, Jesus has caught a great multitude, from every tribe and nation, that no one can number. He has brought them to himself. And for this task he has called many catchers of men to leave everything and follow him. The whole thing is miraculous. That the church has never failed but keeps spreading is the greatest miracle the world has ever seen.

Fishermen and preachers of the gospel who go out and toil on their own come back empty handed. But when Christ is in the boat doing the fishing, he knows where the fish are, he summons them into the net, he ensures that the nets do not tear, and he gets the catch safely into the boat. With Christ, the preaching never fails, the boat never sinks. And that is the point. For the church to catch a single fish, for the toil of any pastor to bear fruit, Christ must be there, in the boat, doing the fishing.

The boat is the church. Like Noah's ark that preserved believing Noah and his family through the flood, bringing them safe to dry land on a fresh new earth. Just so, baptism into the church – the ark of Christendom – preserves you from the evil world. It keeps us as one family, to eternal life in the new heavens and the new earth, where all sin is washed away.

At one time you were outside this boat, until you were drawn in through baptism. And there are still very many fish outside the boat. Fish don't want to be caught and taken aboard. Being caught means dying. To a fish, it means suffocation, captivity. Fish fight hard to stay out of the nets. But if the net is the gospel, being caught is really best thing that could happen, though the fish doesn't know it. The word of the cross is folly to those that are perishing. Being caught means dying, yes, but dying to sin. Baptism is dying to sin and rising to new life in Christ. Being caught means no more freedom, yes, but is the loss of freedom to swim away from God a bad thing? Being caught means being drawn to God, whether you want to or not. So although the fish of the world have no idea that being caught is good, although the last thing they want is to be taken into the boat, that is what they need.

And even if they wanted to get into the boat, they couldn't do it on their own. It's nearly impossible for a fish to jump up into a boat. And it's completely impossible for an unbeliever to make himself a Christian, even if he wanted to.

But you are fish that have been caught. You are a fish in the boat, and now the boat is moving away from the deep water, carrying you ashore. Jesus is here, keeping you alive by his word and sacrament, so you don't suffocate. He has truly set you free, to follow him. The nets that have closed around you are the same nets of the gospel heard by the crowds at the shore of Galilee. They recognized the words of life. They pressed close to Jesus to hear him, forcing him offshore into a boat pulpit. And now you sit in a church sanctuary, listening to your new pastor preach the gospel from a pulpit. And if you look up at the wooden beams of the rafters above you, you could imagine those timbers are like an upside-down hull of a ship. And the big, round, stained glass window back there is like a porthole. In this church we're inside a little boat. Jesus is here in word and sacrament, protecting us from the raging world.

There couldn't be a better gospel text for a new pastor and his congregation to hear. For me, the lesson is: If Christ is not preaching in the boat, all my toil will be utterly in vain. But if Christ is here and he is doing the fishing, then he will guide the boat. He will bring the right fish. Like the apostle Peter, my only task is to leave everything and follow him, saying, "At your word, Lord, I will let down the nets." Going back out fishing after toiling all night seems like folly, but the wisdom of God is wiser than men. So I must never bait the hook with gimmicks or palatable words, but only with the preaching of Christ crucified. If I'm not preaching Christ crucified, my words are nothing. But if I preach Christ crucified, I preach by the power of God and the wisdom of God. And when Jesus miraculously brings in fish, however he chooses, then all I can do is to repent of my sin and give

him the glory, for I am indeed a sinful man. I need the absolution of my crucified Lord. I need his words, "Do not be afraid." I need to hear again his call to leave everything and follow him.

As for you fish in the boat, the lesson is that you have done nothing to get yourself here. You were fish that didn't even want to be here. Christ drew you up out of the sea through baptism, a baptism that involved dying, and now you are safe. Now your job in the boat is to listen, listen to the preaching of Jesus through his appointed catchers of men. Christ crucified for you is your only hope, so press close to him and hold on to his words. Listen to this preacher, even though he is young and inexperienced. For he is called by Christ to be a catcher of men, and Christ has promised to be with him. God speaks to you not by an impressive voice of an earthquake, not by a rushing wind or by a fire, but by the still, small voice of a sinful man. Yet by the power of the Holy Spirit, that still small voice speaks the power of God for salvation. The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

So listen to your fisherman, preaching Christ crucified. And stay in the boat, where Jesus is. Stay in church. As any fisherman knows, it's much more likely that a fish will be able to flop back out into the water, than that a fish will jump into a boat on its own.

Finally, like the apostle Peter, repent and confess your sin. And believe the absolution of your crucified Lord. Believe when Jesus tells you, "Do not be afraid, you are forgiven." Never say to Jesus, "Depart from me, O Lord." If your Lord departs from this boat, everything will fail. Your sin will remain. The fishing will cease. The nets will break. The boat will sink. Without Jesus, none will arrive at the good shore of paradise. No. Instead of what Peter said, say the opposite: "Do not depart from me, O Lord!" Say what the two disciples on Easter evening on the road to Emmaus said to him, "Stay with us Lord." And the crucified and risen Lord will stay with you. He will sit down to feed you, here in the boat, with his own body and blood. Just as sat and ate with those two at Emmaus. Just as he came to Peter and the disciples again in John chapter 21, after his resurrection, after another miraculous catch of fish at Galilee. And he came to serve them fish for breakfast. Amen. Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.