

Sermon on 5EpiphanyC: Isaiah 6:1-13; I Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11  
Preached at Custer Lutheran Fellowship on February 4, 2007, Pastor David Van Kley

## GONE FISHING

The scene is etched in my memory. Vacation Bible School, four or five years ago. A warm summer day. I was across Highway 16A teaching kids to fish on the Stockade Lake inlet. Pastor Arley Fadness and Dave Hanson, a dangerous pair if ever there was one, staged the part of today's gospel where Jesus teaches the crowds from a boat. Dave lugged a canoe down to the water and Arley got in. Well, if you don't know or haven't already guessed the outcome, the canoe flipped, sending its two occupants splashing headlong, while the kids watched, wide-eyed. It's a good thing the water wasn't very deep!

That day along Lake Gennesaret, we read that a Tiger Woods-like crowd **pressed** in on Jesus. They were the poor and oppressed to whom he came to preach good news. They were the blind and lame he came to heal. There were so many and they were so needy that he had to requisition a fisherman's boat and put out from shore a few yards to teach, just for visibility and safety.

When he finished speaking, Jesus told that fisherman—Simon Peter—to head for deep water and cast his nets. It made no sense—they'd fished all night, caught nothing. So many days and nights are like that: hard work, no results! "But if you say so, Master," Peter said, with more than a little skepticism. If **you** say so. Suddenly, the nets were swarming with fish, more fish in the nets than faces in the crowd. So many that Peter and his friends could not hold them with two boats. Where did all these fish come from?

You'd think Peter would dance a jig and shout, "Whooooeee!" You'd think he'd head for town and buy everyone a round. But the encounter had the opposite effect. He fell to his knees and begged Jesus to leave him. "Don't you know," he said; "I'm a sinful man?" The catch was **too** good, I suppose. Peter knew it had nothing to do with his skill. He knew he didn't deserve it. He knew he was standing in the presence of someone infinitely bigger and holier than himself. Then I imagine this powerful, mysterious Jesus touching him gently on the shoulder and saying: "Don't be afraid, Peter; from now on, you'll be catching people."

At the *Elder's Wisdom, Children's Song* concert last Tuesday, the MC kept saying, "give it up for so and so" and we'd all rise and applaud? Well Peter gave it up for Jesus. Not thirty seconds of applause. He gave it **all** up. The fish, the boat, the business. Everything. And followed him.

I've always identified with this story because I am a fishing addict. Once, back in fourth or fifth grade, I biked to a local pond, where I saw two large bass spawning along the shore. I tried all afternoon to catch them, using everything in my tackle box. Then, I scratched in the dirt a little bit and found a tiny worm. I baited my hook with it and, bang, I caught a 4 pound bass. I found another worm and threw that in. Bang: I caught

the other fish, a 3 pounder. Incredibly proud of myself, I stuffed the fish into my bucket, their flapping tails hanging out, and pedaled home to show my mom.

When Arlene and I married, almost the first thing we did was to move to upper Michigan, a fisher's paradise. For the first year or two there, I fished every spare moment, often compelling Arlene to join me, though she never really liked it much. We caught fish—every species, every size. We cleaned 'em and froze 'em and fried 'em and baked 'em. I nailed their heads to trees like trophies. Life was good.

Yet, there came a time when I realized that life was not about the fish. I hungered for something more than a full creel bag; I longed to stand in the presence of someone bigger than myself. This is when I met Christ Jesus anew in Word and Sacrament. I was astounded that one so good would give it up—give it **all** up—for people like me. In his overwhelming, cleansing, inviting presence, people became a higher priority than fish.

Every week, Christ Jesus is present beside **this** lake through Word and Sacrament. He requisitions our boats and commands us to throw our nets into the deep. He invites us to leave our preoccupations on the shore and walk with him into the vast and extravagant love of God. It's the kind of thing that humbles you, scares the daylights out of you, and exhilarates you all at the same time. It's like leaving the wading section at the motel pool and diving into the deep water at the other end.

It can happen in crisis. When Mike was in his mid-thirties, he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. For several weeks, he and Denise sought to adjust to this news, preparing for whatever came next. What came next was a second x-ray that showed the first diagnosis to be wrong. No cancer, after all! You'd think Mike and Denise would be overjoyed and they were, but they were also strangely sobered. "We've been majoring in minors," they said. "We've been spending our time on all the wrong things." They left their preoccupations on the shore and followed Jesus.

Have you ever hurt someone you love very deeply, only to have him or her forgive you unconditionally? Then you know what I mean. You were grateful and relieved, but also sobered by the experience. If you thought very much about it, you knew God was in the middle of it. It changed your life—you, too, learned to forgive.

Maybe you are just minding your business, doing whatever it is that you do, when someone asks you to read the lessons in church, go to Nicaragua, teach Sunday School. In so doing, you discover gifts you never thought you had and serve others in Christ's name.

Often, Jesus does not call us to change anything in our lives, so much as to see our lives in a new way. Recently, I visited two friends who are artists. People have begun to buy their work and tell them how much that work means to them. It is an amazing, humbling thing—to be of service to others while using God's gifts to you!

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Thirty years ago, Frederick Buechner wrote, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Amen to that!

All of us do many things in our lives, but we really have only one calling: to follow Jesus and catch people in God’s net of justice, mercy, and love. 24-7.

Years ago, Pastor Larry Peterson left the security of Hill City, to cast God’s nets into the deep, at Pine Ridge. Today, the Puppeteers leave the security of Pine Ridge to cast God’s nets in the deep, here in Custer. This morning Christ Jesus stops beside **our** lake and says to us, “Is that your boat? Mind if come along?” Amen.