

Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8 [9-13]; Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

It's a funny thing about nets. They can be used in very different ways. Sometimes they trap, they ensnare, they capture. But sometimes, they rescue, they free, they move what is caught from danger to safety. But I'm getting ahead of myself...

Why is it, that fish are no good at tennis? *Because they don't like to get too close to the net!* **Have you seen the new fishing website?** *No, of course not, it's not online yet.* **What's the best way to catch a fish?** *Have someone throw it at you, of course.* Now I don't want to offend anyone, but... you know, don't you, **how many South Dakotans it takes to go ice fishing?** *Four. One to cut the hole in the ice, and three to push the boat through.*¹

Fishing, along with golf and other sports, they make for good jokes, don't they? Fishing, at least in this corner of the world, is mostly a sport. It's recreation. Again, I don't want offend anyone, it's not that many don't take fishing very seriously, but fishing in the time and space of Luke's Gospel wasn't a sport. It wasn't recreation. It was a way of life. It was life. It was the way that you fed yourself and your family.

So maybe you can imagine how they felt... They sit there on the shore, doing the morning after work of washing their nets clean. A bit like licking their wounds.

We don't really realize it at the time, but it's almost offensive when Jesus takes a break from his teaching to tell Simon, "Go out into the deep water and let down your nets..." Because Simon answers Jesus: 'Come on, what do you want from us? We've been working all night long and we've got nothing to show for it.'

This wasn't a quiet afternoon on Stockade Lake for Simon and the other fishermen. It wasn't like if you don't catch anything, you still get the quiet, the peace of mind, the relaxation of a 'day off on the lake.' In fact, it had nothing to do with a day off, this was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day of work. This was like not getting a paycheck even though you put in a hard day's work. This was a long, unproductive night-shift. When was

¹ All of the one liner jokes in this sermon are taken or adapted from the following website:
main.reeltaleslodge.com/2009/09/27/fishing-jokes-few-one-liners-2/

the last time you had one of those? It doesn't always have to actually be night-time, does it, to have a long, dark fruitless night?

So what's this Jesus up to as he seems to salt their wounds? He doesn't seem to offer much consolation, but instead commands them to live out that timeless definition of insanity attributed to Einstein: *doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.*

If we are dissecting this "call" story, if we're taking apart the call to discipleship piece by piece, then maybe this is the first part. The beginning. Anatomically speaking, we're at the head of the fish. Simply and honestly put: *the call to be a disciple – literally the call to be a fish in God's net – is more than a little insane.* Incidentally, you know, don't you **what part of a fish doesn't make any sense at all?** *The piece of cod that passeth all understanding.*

But remember in Luke's Gospel, this isn't the first time that Simon's met this Jesus guy. Just the chapter before, Jesus stopped over at Simon's house, 'cause Simon's mother-in-law had a fever. And Jesus "stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her..." we're told. "Immediately she got up and began to serve them."

Literally, when this story is told in Greek, "the fever *forgave* her." It's the same word that means "to forgive" as well as "to leave" or "to let go." And let me tell you, this little gem of a word shows up all over in the most interesting (we might even say, the most insane) places in the Gospels.

So Simon already knows that there's something about this Jesus. Even though it seems like he's salting the wounds of their very bad day of fishing, he's willing to do what he says.

But I would guess (I'll just speak for myself...), if he's anything like me, he really does it because he knows he'll come back with another empty net and he just wants to be able to say or at the very least self-righteously think, "You see Jesus, I knew your idea was insane from the start. I told you so." It's almost like he plants that seed when he sarcastically responds to Jesus: "...if you say so, I will let down the nets," says Simon.

"When they had done this," the story tells us like so many other great fish-tales, "they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break." Those of you who fish know, don't you, **where most fish are found?** *Between the head and the tail, of course.*

Again, if we're dissecting this as a call story, then I wonder if this isn't the second part. The middle. Anatomically speaking, it's the part between the head and the tail. It's the body. It's the guts of the fish. It's the heart and the lungs of God's call to you and to me. Simply and honestly put, *once you've taken the first step, once you've gotten past the insanity of initially heeding the call to be a disciple – all of a sudden, now you've got a whole new set of problems.*

It's not like all of a sudden life is perfect and now you've got no problems. It's not like it's a walk in the park or one endless day off or one vacation after another. Anyone who's hauled in a big fish knows that it is work. You're worried about your line breaking. Your fishing pole is bending farther than you thought it possibly could bend without breaking. If you try to take a break just for one minute, you lose it. It swims back into the deep and you go home with empty nets.

And it looks like that's exactly what's going to happen. They're nets start to break and they have to call for help from their partners in the other boat. But even that doesn't fix the problem. Their fishing partners come and they fill "both boats, so that they began to sink."

Not that inviting someone to church is the "be-all-and-end-all" of the call to discipleship; but I wonder, if maybe the reason that it's so hard to invite someone else to church or even to invite someone to consider being caught up like a fish in the net of God; is because deep down we know it's gonna be trouble for 'em. The author Annie Dillard puts it this way:

Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.²

Maybe it's why we're so afraid. Somewhere in our guts, we know it's probably going to be an even harder life once we get caught up in the nets of God. We know, that the pendulum swings and we just trade in a long, dark fruitless night for a catch of fish so big that your boat starts to sink...

So now you've got two choices. You just sink under the weight of it all. Or you just let it all go.

² This quote is from the essay "An Expedition to the Pole" in Dillard's volume *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, and recounted on the following website: richardlfloyd.blogspot.com/2009/12/crash-helmets-and-life-jackets-in.html

“...when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees,” I imagine with tears streaming down his face, “saying ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!’ For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken...”

It’s the tail-end of the call to discipleship. Repentance and amazement. Fear and awe. Wonder at the mystery of it all. *What... How did this happen?* You say to yourself... *And what the hell am I supposed to do now?*

And that’s where it all starts over again. The call to discipleship isn’t one fish being caught up in a net. It isn’t settling on what to do with your life, whether to be a fisherman or a football player or a firefighter. Every day of our lives is a new fish, learning to be caught up in the nets of God once again.

“Then Jesus said to Simon, ‘Don’t be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.’” *Catching people.*

You know, that’s the funny thing about nets. You can use a net in more ways than one. Sometimes you use a net to trap, ensnare, capture. But sometimes, you rescue, you free, you move what is caught from danger to safety.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, that phrase “catching people” when it hangs in the mouth of Jesus like a hook when the story is told in Greek, that phrase is unequivocally the second way of using a net. The word, the phrase means ‘being taken alive.’ The call to be disciples is about saving a life not trapping it.

“When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.” And as this part of our fish-tale closes, we get that little gem of a word once again – they “left everything,” literally they *forgave everything* and followed him.

Somehow, forgiveness is wrapped up and mixed in with the call to be a disciple. It’s in the head. It’s in the tail. It’s in the lungs and the heart of being caught in the net of God. **No joke.**

So may we all be so bold today as to be renewed in our call to be disciples. May we all be so bold today as to let go as best we can of both the long, dark fruitless nights we’ve known and the boat so heavy that it’s going to sink. May we let it go and again find ourselves on the tail of Jesus. Even if it means following all the way to the cross or beyond. Amen.