

“We’re Gonna Need a Bigger Boat”

Luke 5: 1-15

We have heard this story or at least a version of this story about a hundred times because this story or some form of this story can be found in all the Gospels. All these stories include the same moment, the moment when the disciples meet Jesus, the moment when they dropped their nets and followed Jesus. I would guess that it is safe for us to say that we are all able to relate to this particular moment for these disciples. We can relate because we have encountered God in our lives at one point or another and that moment changed us; otherwise we wouldn’t be sitting here this morning. So, of course, knowing all this, I assumed that this sermon would be easy to write. But... One phrase kept going through my mind...., the phrase, “You will be catching people”.

There is just something about that phrase which makes me uncomfortable. There is just something about that phrase which brings to mind images of people flailing on a line. When I read this phrase, my mind doesn’t automatically go towards images about fishing. It goes towards images of hunting. When I read this phrase, I have imagines of African safaris popping into my head. Images of traps. Images of bait. Images of heads mounted on the wall like trophies. Images of great hunters preying on the weak.

Now don't get me wrong...I'm from a good Southern family who has done their share of hunting and fishing. There are plenty of deer heads and trophy fish on the walls. But I have to tell you there is something about the phrase "catching people" which brings to my mind, the understanding that once these trophies are mounted, all we see are their glassy eyes, their vacant stares and it makes me wonder: Is that what we as people of faith do when we invite others to experience God and God's Kingdom? Do we turn people into trophies mounted on a wall with vacant looks and glassy eyes? Is that what we offer as the Kingdom of God?

I started thinking: Do we invite people into our communities of faith only to consume them later? And is that how we as the Church are perceived or want to be perceived? Is the image of us as the Church preying on the weak, tricking them to get into the doors, inviting them only to have that invitation of welcome turn into an invitation to be consumed, is that how we really want to be perceived by the wider community and culture around us?

And then let's take it one step farther, once we get people inside, what do we offer our brothers and sisters? glassy eyes and blank stares? Empty phrases and empty promises? False feelings and false connections? I think if Jesus knew how the Church, how we as people of faith have used and abused this particular phrase, he would have come up with some other image to describe the invitation to be his disciple.

Think about it for a minute...we have used the phrase “catch people” to unfortunately transform the Body of Christ into traps and bait, to turn his people, the very people who need healing and wholeness, into people with blank stares and glassy eyes. As the wider church, we have replaced the phrase “catching people” for the life giving story of the Gospel when it comes to the invitation for all to experience the Kingdom of God in our midst. No, I don’t think Jesus would like what we have done as people of faith at all especially knowing what he did preach concerning the unconditional nature of God’s love, especially knowing what he did preach concerning the inviting, welcoming presence of the Kingdom of God, I don’t think Jesus would like what we have become as a community of faith with all our gimmicks and tricks to get people into the door especially knowing what he did preach concerning the freely-given gift which is God’s grace. No I don’t think Jesus would like very much how we are living out the phrase “catching people”. And to be honest, I don’t think Luke liked how his community may have been living out the phrase “catching people either”.

That’s why in his version of this story, Luke really doesn’t focus on Jesus extending the call to the disciples. When he shares his version of this story, Luke’s main focus is their response, their response to the Word of God. Luke knows that it is through the Word of God, lives are changed, altered, transformed. And this word is a word of peace. A word of hope. A word which frees us from traps and baits.

The word of God is a word of grace which compels us into action. It is a word which cultivates relationships and brings healing and wholeness for all of God's people, not just a chosen few.

You see, Luke starts his story just like all the other Gospels but then he adds a twist. You see, in the other Gospels, Jesus is new at his ministry. He really has only just started preaching or teaching but in this story according to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has been at it for a while. He has been traveling around teaching and preaching about the Kingdom of God for quite some time. Before Jesus even thinks about calling his first disciples, he has already been going around Nazareth, spreading the news about the Kingdom of God coming near for all of God's people. At this point in his ministry, according to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has already started cultivating relationships in and among the people. Jesus has already started transforming the lives of the people which he encountered along the way. At this point in his ministry, according the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has already started bringing the Kingdom of God near for the people of God.

So in this part of the text, we find Jesus doing what he does best. He is at the Lake Shore, surrounded by people who want to hear the Good News. They are pressing in on him, straining just to hear him speak. He looks around and sees a couple of boats. He climbs into one of them and asks the fisherman to push away from the shore.

Let me stop right here and clear up some confusion. There is a common misconception that this is the first time Simon encounters Jesus. This is not true. We are told that Simon already knows something about this man Jesus because in the chapter before this one, Jesus comes to Simon's house and heals Simon's mother in law.

There is already a relationship here between Jesus and Simon. Maybe that's why Jesus feels comfortable borrowing Simon's boat. Maybe that's why Simon does what Jesus asks. Because there was already a relationship there. And for Simon and for the rest of the disciples, it is this connection which makes all the difference. When Simon is asked to put down his nets again, he doesn't protest too loudly or say that this activity is pointless. He simply says, "We've caught nothing all night but if you say so, I'll do it." Simon has already seen Jesus at work. He has already experienced the Kingdom of God coming near. Simon already has a connection to Jesus and that makes all difference.

Again, this puts that whole "catching of people" into a new perspective, doesn't it? No longer is it simply about saving souls and numbers. Now our response as Jesus' disciples is framed within the context of building relationships with others. It is framed within the context of embracing how we as Jesus' disciples respond to this invitation or even how we extend this invitation to others. Our response is now framed within the context of relationships and God's grace.

Luke wants his community and us to understand today that “the calling [to be disciples, the calling to “catch people] is not a [way] to hook people and drag them in. It is rather to cast the net of God’s love all around-open to all the world-and then wait with patience for the Spirit’s work.” The key is God’s grace. The key is God’s hope. The key is God, not you and me.

When Luke shares in the story that Jesus tells Simon to go out again, to go fishing again, he wants his community and us as readers to understand that what is important is our response as Jesus’ disciples. Jesus came and changed lives through his teaching and preaching. He shared God’s word with us as children of God. This Living Word freed us, freed us from being people with glassy eyes and blank stares, freed us from being roped in, freed us from being ensnared by the trappings of this world.

And in turn we are called to do the same...because we know, we know that when God’s Word is shared and heard, it is not an invitation to be consumed. Rather it is an invitation to new life, new life experienced through God’s grace and God’s love. “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.”

This is what Jesus means when he invites the disciples to “catch people”. This is what Jesus means when he begins teaching along the lake shore to the

crowd and to the fishermen in the boat that morning. This is what Jesus means when he said, "Let down your nets for a catch." God's Word is an invitation to new life. God's Word transforms us. God's Word saves us. God's Word frees us as God's children to be the people that God created us to be.

When we realize this, then we as the church will no longer only offer glassy eyes and blank stares to those who enter our doors because now we know, now we understand, now we live out in our own lives, in our own communities, in our own world the amazing knowledge that there is life, renewal, comfort and hope in the Word of God. When we realize this, we will see the invitation to "catch people" not as a way to snare them, to consume them, to trap them but as a way to free them through God's grace and God's love.

And that is the Good News that we are called to proclaim as followers of Jesus Christ. We know we are called to share the life giving, life changing experience of God's grace with others. Not because we need to reel them in. But because that is how the Kingdom of God comes near for us and for all of God's people. We share God's grace, we share God's love, we share God's peace with others knowing that these things are not tricks or gimmicks. Instead they are the very keys to the Kingdom.

God's peace, God's love, God's grace call us to be in relationship with one another. They call us to cultivate community with one another. These things

remind us that there is more to being disciple than reeling people in. Being a disciple of Jesus begins when we put down our nets and follow Jesus, when we see people as created in the image of God, when we respond to this world's pain and hurts with compassion. Being a disciple of Jesus begins when we open our hearts, when we open our minds to the life giving power of God's word. Because when that happens, we are going to need a bigger table. We are going to need a bigger boat. We are going to need a bigger vision of the Kingdom of God so that all are invited to know and experience the life giving, life transforming power of the Word of God for the people of God. May it be so. Amen.