

February 10, 2019 • 5th Sunday after Epiphany

## “God’s Big Net of Love”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, 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; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Last Sunday, we heard Paul’s beautiful passage on love from 1st Corinthians. Several of you commented afterwards on how meaningful those verses are to you and how important they’ve been for you over the years. We tied that passage to Jesus and the purpose of his anointing by God. Remember? Reading from the Prophet Isaiah, Jesus said: “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me...” to do what? “To bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Then, he continued on, through the examples he used, to show how in every age, God anoints prophets to remind us of the message that rings clear over and over again through the Scriptures--that God intends for the people of God to become a universal, inclusive community representing God’s love and acceptance for all. God’s love is love with a very long trajectory and an astonishingly wide reach.

One biblical scholar has note that the Gospels consistently present Jesus as “one of the most gloriously free, unprejudiced, uninhibited—and therefore attractive---individuals who ever walked the earth.” And when the church acts in the same manner, prioritizing grace over law, including “good” and “bad” alike, the doors of the church open wide, revealing the big scope of God’s love available to one and all.

Now, today let’s see how that basic message, the heart of Jesus’ mission and ministry, gives us a new framework for understanding the passage we hear this morning about the fishermen and their full to over-flowing nets.

Here’s how the story goes. Jesus was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, also called the Sea of Galilee. While the crowds pressed in around him to hear the Word of God. Jesus does a most interesting thing. He looks around and sees two boats. The fishermen, who had been fishing all night, had pulled up to shore and were cleaning their nets. Jesus walks over to Simon Peter’s boat and gets in. He asks him to put out a little ways and starts teaching the crowds from the boat.

How strange it must have seemed to Simon Peter, who most certainly was tired after a long night’s hard work. Yet, he complies, accommodating Jesus’ request. Surely, he had no idea what he was getting himself into. For just as soon as Jesus stops teaching with words, he then turns to Simon and says: “put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” No doubt shaking his head, Simon replies: “Master, we fished all night and didn’t catch a thing. But, if you say so, I’ll let down the nets.” And when they did, the nets were so full of fish that they nearly tore apart at the seams.

Ah...Jesus is still teaching them, but now, rather than using words, he’s letting them discover for themselves, through their faithful actions, just how very much God can do. The nets were full of so many fish, they had to call over the second boat as well and filled it up, too.

Simon Peter is humbled by Jesus’ faith in him. He’s painfully aware of his own failings and shortcomings. Who am I, Lord, to deserve your trust? But Jesus responds compassionately to him. “Don’t be afraid. From now on, you’ll be catching people.” And when they got back to shore, the fishermen left their nets behind to follow Jesus, joining him in his mission to teach people and show people God’s big net of love.

Couple things going on here. Let’s start with Simon Peter’s reaction, that first thought he had that he was not worthy. My sense is that most of us wrestle with that same feeling. We hear that same voice inside asking: “who, me?!?” Questions of self-esteem and self-worth reside within us all. We’ve internalized really well all those messages about not being.... what....skinny enough? Fit enough? Smart enough? Rich enough? Organized enough? Hip enough? Good enough? Young enough? Old enough? You name it, we’re plagued by it.

And to each of us God, through Christ Jesus, offers an awesome word of grace. "Don't be afraid." Of yourself or anyone else. Let go of all that disempowering doubt. I am with you, calling us by name. You are loved just as you are. I give you all the love and respect and power you need to be the child of God that God created you to be. My love is about catching people, starting with you, drawing you into my big net of love that frees you from death of any and every kind and sets you free.

There's a hand-painted sign on the Sunday School bulletin board outside the church office. Says it all, in a way that works for kids but probably for us all, especially in this season. "You are always God's Valentine."

No wonder Simon Peter wanted to be part of that. Don't we all? When Simon Peter experiences God's embracing, forgiving, life-giving power of love, he's ready to give up everything and follow Jesus.

So now if that's the "heads" on this coin of Jesus' teaching here, the "tails," the other side of the coin, is just as awesome. It's what United Methodists call the necessity of both personal and social holiness.

This love of God starts with me and at the same time encompasses everyone. All God's children. Yep, the net's that big! What we learn today from this story about Jesus follows right on what we heard last week. No one is outside the net. Oh, we might like to think that it's a small, modest net, with room only for a few. With space only for certain people or certain kinds of people. Or just the few measly stragglers we happened to pull in. Oh no, no. God's big net of love is so big that it wraps around everyone everywhere and still cannot break apart.

We may have started out this morning assuming this to be that old familiar story about fishermen and nets and fish, but not really. It's a story about Love. It's yet another story that helps open our eyes and hearts enough to hear God saying: "Behold, I am doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it?"

This is a story about God calling us to believe in ourselves, to believe that God can work through us, through our efforts, through our lives. For example, I know that a couple folks on this year's Haiti Team, going for the first time, are pushing way beyond their comfort zone, as they themselves are the first to say. And yet, they've felt a call and they trust that with God, and with our prayerful support, they can become part of something much bigger than themselves. For, in the words of Frederick Buechner: "the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's hunger meet." "Let down your nets," Jesus said to them, and they have.

And this a story that helps us believe that God can work miracles far beyond what we believe can ever happen. Don't we know that little voice that Simon Peter also hears objecting: "oh, but Jesus, we fished all night and nothing came of it! No point in trying again." "Let down your nets," Jesus said, ignoring him. God can work miracles far beyond what we believe can ever happen.

We've got a great team from our congregation and our Preschool participating in this year's Home Run for Kids this morning. Our work in this community to end homelessness through Upward Bound House now far surpasses our original vision. 2600 children, living in their own home, sleeping in their own bed. Safe. Loved.

And this is a story that shows us again that the humungous net of God's love can embrace far more than all we can imagine. One of the things I love about Home Run for Kids, and the Haiti Team, and Habitat for Humanity, and all the amazing mission work we participate in, is that in so doing, we expand our notion of congregation and community far beyond the confines of this sanctuary, far beyond what people might normally think of as "church." We make our faith visible in the community, to the community, for the whole community, indeed for the whole world. In a world super skeptical now, maybe not about faith or spirituality, but certainly about church, we need to keep finding ways to make that big net of God's love visible and real to those who don't yet know its power and its strength.

This is the story of the bursting-at-the-seams nets, the great big net of God's love, ready to catch up each and every one of us in that great story of our God making all things new.

So now, remember the words of Paul that we often use as our benediction: "And now unto God who, by the power at work within us, is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine..."

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Notes:

Jeffrey John. *The Meaning in the Miracles*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 2001.

Bishop Jack M. Tuell. *From Law to Grace: An Autobiography*. Nashville: Abindgon, 2005.

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