

Sermon for the 5th Sunday after the Epiphany 2019.

Luke 5:1-11.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.
Amen.

The text for the Sermon is the Gospel we heard before, Luke 5:1-11.

1 While the people were crowding around Jesus as they were listening to the Word of God, He was standing beside the Lake of Gennesaret. 2 He saw two boats standing on the shore of the lake. The fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 3 Then Jesus got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from the shore. He sat down and began to teach the crowd from the boat. 4 When He had stopped speaking, He told Simon, "Put out into the deep water, and let down your nets for a catch!"

5 Simon answered, "Master, we have been working hard all night and have caught nothing. Nevertheless, at Your Word, I shall let down the nets."

6 When the men had done this, they caught a very large number of fish, and their nets began to tear. 7 They signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They came and they filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. 8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell down at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me! For I am a sinful man, Lord."

9 He and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken, 10 and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were Simon's partners. Then Jesus told Simon, "Stop being afraid! From now on you will be catching people."

11 When they had brought the boats to the shore, they left everything and became His followers.

Lord God heavenly Father, sanctify us in Your truth, Your Word is Truth Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,
Peace be with you.

As we hear in the Gospel Reading of a miraculous catch of fish, we need to remember one important thing: Night time is the best time for fishing, if you lived in the days of Simon Peter. You wouldn't fish during the day time. Professional, knowledgeable fishermen such as James and John and Peter knew this fact. Usually it was too hot during the day so the fish would be down in the deep keeping cool. They had fished all night but had caught nothing, and were sitting around mending nets during the daylight hours, probably preparing for the next nights fishing. And besides, the fish seemed to be avoiding them in that part of the Lake of Genessaret.

Then, Jesus turned up and said, "Launch out your boats. Let down the nets." Well! all their years of experience told them, "No." The fishing traditions passed down to them by generations of fishermen said, "No." Common sense said, "No." How could they catch anything during the day when they had not caught anything even at night, the right time?

Simon Peter said, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But since it's You asking it, Jesus, we'll do it." So they did. And the Son of Man, who has dominion over the works of Creation, beneath whose feet the Father has put all things, including the fish of the sea, He produced in the net of Simon Peter a miraculous catch of fish so when the net was breaking and they needed the other boats to bring the catch to shore.

But those fish are not the main point. A greater net, and a greater catch are indicated in the words of Christ: **" From now on you will be catching people."** In case there is any doubt among us Lutherans, let it be known that the Net that catches men is the Gospel. The Gospel is the power of God for salvation to all that have faith. That Gospel is found in Word and Sacrament. The Gospel is spoken as the Absolution of forgiveness of sins. The Gospel is preached from pulpits. The Gospel is poured out in the waters of Baptism. The Gospel is tasted in the Body and Blood of Christ - and by this Gospel Net, men and women are caught, and the Church is built.

When Christ was saying that they should cast out during the day instead of the night, He was not saying that when one strategy fails, try another one. On the contrary. He was saying that the Church should always stick to the one Net which is the Gospel, even when success seems unlikely, and even when it doesn't seem to work.

This Net goes against all human reason. Worldly wisdom tells us we should cast the nets of persuasiveness, love, and business techniques in order to make the Church grow. Those things make sense. But to keep on trusting the same old Net of the Gospel - that goes against all common sense.

We sometimes feel that the Net of the Gospel doesn't work well enough. We sometimes feel that God needs a helping hand! - and there are other, more effective nets, or, that the Gospel Net could be used together with other nets to build the Church. But the Gospel, and only the Gospel, builds the Church. Not human good works. Not human cleverness or wisdom. Not strategies or programs. Only the Gospel.

Other nets may seem to bring in a good catch, for a time. We may pile bodies into the sanctuary based on all kinds of principles. But they won't be here for the right reason. Their hearts will be far from the true God and His Word. As soon as they feel that they can no longer get what they want from this House, they will jump out of the boat and swim away. If they are not brought by the Word, they will have no reason to stay.

With the Net of the Gospel, the Church will be filled. But we must realize that the over-flowing catch of the Gospel happens according to God's will and God's timing - not ours. When we expect a bountiful catch at night, Christ will give it at noon. Sometimes, congregations will flourish and bring many converts to Christ. Other times, congregations will be forced to close their doors, even when the Gospel has been faithfully proclaimed. Even when the waters of Baptism are flowing, and when the Supper of Christ is celebrated, sometimes the numbers we expect will be lacking.

Because the Holy Spirit works faith through the Gospel when and where He pleases, we cannot guarantee success. All we can do is to faithfully cast the Net, and trust God. This Net, the Gospel, is the Church's one needful thing. As a great Lutheran hymn says, "One thing's needful; Lord this treasure / Teach me highly to regard; / All else, though it first give pleasure, / Is a yoke that presses hard."

Yet we are tempted in different ways to mistrust this Net of the Gospel. One temptation urges us to abandon what is offensive to modern culture, and so compromise doctrine, discipline, and fellowship. We're tempted to throw away orthodox liturgy and hymns, in exchange for what moves people emotionally. These temptations are justified by the promise of catching more fish. But only the Net of the Gospel catches fish, not strategies. In changing the historic doctrine and practice of Christianity, we will inevitably lose the Net itself. Woe to us if that happens, since we will not only lose the fish we hoped to catch, but also our own souls.

Another temptation urges us to try to meet the needs that people feel; make them feel at home; make them feel loved. Make them feel needed. And so on. Some of those things may be good in themselves. But they must not take center stage in the Church, because then they push the Gospel out of the center. That is why targeting human needs must never become what the Church is about. Justification in the Cross of Christ must never be one gift among many. This Gospel is the heart and substance of what makes us the Church, as the Augsburg Confession says: "***The Church is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.***"

Now, some people say that we must first get people into the pews before we can preach the Gospel to them. That is false. You can speak the Gospel to people at the grocery store, at the post office, in your home, at the shopping centre, anywhere.

Some people say that we should be as welcoming as possible to people who visit, and that's true. "But " as welcoming as possible" does not mean admitting them to the Altar before they have been thoroughly instructed. We can invite as many people as we want to Church, and we should. But remember that just because their body is in the pew does not mean that they believe, nor that they ever will.

So we must cast out the net faithfully, and trust the Spirit to do the rest in His time.

When we first cast out the net, we must tell people that they are fish who need catching, that is, sinners who need redemption. The primary way that people sin is by mistrusting God and His Word. It doesn't matter whether we are in the boat throwing the Net, or whether we are fish in the water. It doesn't matter whether we are believers who speak the Word, or unbelievers. None of us trusts the Word as we should! Our whole nature desires other nets and other methods and strategies. By mistrusting God's Word, we deserve punishment.

Peter confessed, **“Go away from me! For I am a sinful man, Lord.”** Peter knew he deserved punishment. Are we better than Peter? Peter doubted whether it would do any good to cast out his nets, yet he obeyed his Master's Word nonetheless. Sometimes we are similarly going through the motions. We know the Word is important, but there is that nagging doubt in the back of our minds whether the Word is really effective or not.

To sinners like you and me who fall at the knees of Jesus in repentance, He speaks His Word of comfort: **“Do not be afraid.”** Although you deserve God's punishment, do not fear it. It will not come near you, because your Master's mighty Word protects you.

His Word gives us the benefits of His Cross. For Christ suffered death and hell on the Cross as the sacrifice of atonement for all our sins. He suffered in our place, so **don't be afraid.** The mercy of God is for you and me, because He has removed our guilt. Although we have mistrusted His Word at times, yet the very same Word speaks to us of righteousness and peace. The Lord gives us in His Word the holiness and glory of His own nature. He covers over our iniquities with His precious Blood. And He counts His own obedience to the Father's Word - as our obedience.

Therefore, when Christ tells us to stick to the one Net of the Gospel, He is not issuing a harsh command. He is telling us to stay close to the source of our life and salvation. The Net of the Gospel lifts us out of the sea of chaos and destruction. He rescues us from the snapping jaws of demonic monsters, who would surely devour us if not for the Net. He pulls us into the safety of His boat, which is the Church, an Ark to escape the wickedness of the world and the flood waters of God's wrath. In the boat we are safe, so you don't have to be afraid.

In those disciples, Peter, James, and John, Christ was beginning to create a new thing, the pastoral ministry, which is the ministry of Word and Sacrament. ***“You will be fishers of men,”*** Christ promised. And so they are. The apostles are the foundation upon which the Church is built, since their teaching is nothing but the teaching of Christ. Through their preaching, fish are pulled up into the boat.

The apostles' preaching continues today in those who preach the same doctrine of Christ. For the strength of the Net is the strength of Christ. His Blood and His Cross and His Resurrection are the strands from which the Net is woven. So you also cast the Net whenever you speak of Christ's work of redemption. You also are part of the Apostolic Church that catches men with the Gospel. Let us be crystal clear about this: Churches and pastors in themselves accomplish nothing. They cast the Net of the Gospel, but it is God who miraculously supplies the catch. If judged by **“our”** skills and abilities, then we would catch little or nothing. But the Net belongs to God. Therefore, salvation is from Him, and by Him, and through Him.

Think of how wonderful this truth is! How liberating it is to realize that pastors and congregations do not have to please everyone or do everything! How freeing it is to realize that we cannot achieve the outcome of saving even one person! Thanks be to God! Because we are set free from the satanic spiral of ever-evolving doctrine and practice, in which so many churches are trapped. They must be always changing, always adapting to culture, always politically correct, always appearing nice to everyone they meet.

But to us feeble and inept sinners, God has given the One Net to cast - the solid and sure confession of the Gospel in all its articles. We are set free from the unnerving necessity of meeting everyone's interests. We have instead the singular focus of the Gospel. We are set free from the works-righteous worry of searching for just the right words or techniques to move people to repent and believe. Instead, God and God alone works repentance and salvation. Through the Gospel, He alone creates and sustains faith. We only need to be faithful to the Gospel and leave the results in His hands.

Therefore, here and now, I cast forth the Net to you: I forgive you all your sins. I bestow on you eternal life, through Christ. I declare you safe from Satan's snares. By the authority of God, whose Gospel this is, by the Blood of His Christ and His sufferings on the Cross, by the perfect righteousness and obedience of Jesus, I declare you holy, free, and innocent in God's eyes. To Him alone be all the glory, who alone gives redemption to men: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**
The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. **Amen.**

Prayer of the Church 5th Sunday after the Epiphany 2019

P Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.

Brief silence

P Father of glory, You are great in mercy, abundant in power and Your understanding is beyond measure. Remember Your whole Church throughout the world. Renew and strengthen Your children as they wait patiently for Your glorious salvation to be revealed. Lord, in Your mercy,

C **hear our prayer.**

P Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, You send forth messengers to preach the Gospel. Help all servants of the Word to proclaim Your truth with joy and zeal. Guard and protect them from the assaults of the evil one and their own flesh. Give them grace to live self-controlled and disciplined lives, that Your name may be hallowed. Lord, in Your mercy,

C **hear our prayer.**

P Ruler of all, You sit enthroned above all human might and power. Give to all entrusted with authority among us wisdom to recognize Your rule and humility to serve the common good of our citizens. Remember all in our armed forces and our first responders in every community, and protect them in their service. Lord, in Your mercy,

C **hear our prayer.**

P Father, we confess that our world is filled with suffering because of our sinfulness. Show mercy to each of us and to everyone in need, *[including* _____ *]*. Give them faith in You, strength to endure their difficulties, and relief from their suffering according to Your will. Lord, in your mercy,

C **hear our prayer.**

P O Lord, You lift up the humble. Grant to all who come to the altar this day the humility to trust Christ's promise as He comes to give us His true body and blood for our forgiveness and to give us a share in His own divine life. Lord, in Your mercy,

C **hear our prayer.**

P Holy Father, Your Son has promised to raise all the dead and give to all who trust in Him eternal life. Receive our thanksgiving for Your faithful ones who have fallen asleep in Christ and who await the moment of their final and full healing at the resurrection of the dead. Bring us with them to share in the joy of His glorious appearing. Lord, in Your mercy,

C **hear our prayer.**

P Into Your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**

4th Hymn: 536,