

A sermon preached at Grace Church, Russell Road in Alexandria, VA on February 10, 2019.
The 5th Sunday after Epiphany: Isaiah 6:1-8, [9-13]; Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I don't know if The Very Rev. Ian S. Markham, Dean and President of Virginia Theological Seminary, preaches much here at Grace Church. If he does, you know he generally likes to offer a joke at the start of his sermon. Usually, the joke relates somehow to his sermon or the lesson(s) read in church. I recently received a copy of the book, *Lectionary Levity: The Use of Humor in Preaching*, which Ian co-authored with Samantha Gottlich, a VTS alum and priest in the Diocese of Texas. They suggest "humor is intended to be a way in for the preaching of the Gospel." So, I'll share their offering for this 5th Sunday after the Epiphany in Year C:

"An Episcopal priest parked his car in a no-parking zone in a large city because he was short of time and couldn't find a space with a meter. Then he put a note under the windshield wiper that read:

Look, I have circled the block ten times. If I don't park here, I'll miss my appointment. Forgive us our trespasses.

When he returned, he found a citation from a police officer with this note:

I've circled this block for ten years. If I don't give you a ticket, I'll lose my job. Lead us not into temptation."

The Synoptic gospels of Matthew and Mark speak of Jesus' calling the first disciples, Simon and Andrew and those twin sons of Zebedee, James and John, while walking alongside the Sea of Galilee. But only in Luke's gospel do we hear the story of a miraculous haul of fish after a fruitless night of casting their nets, which precedes the calling of the first disciples.

The story begins with crowds pressing in upon Jesus eager to hear the Good News. Aware that crowding was becoming a problem, Jesus notices two boats by the Sea of Galilee (or, as Luke says, the Lake of Gennesaret). He climbs into Simon's boat and asks him to shove off a bit. And then he sits down to preach which is the custom in the synagogue.

Have you ever wondered about Jesus' preaching style? I suspect, though not noted in the gospels, that there could have been back-and-forth dialogue, with questions, pauses, and then, from time to time, a parable right out of the present. This sermon tells us nothing of his style, but leaves us room to wonder.

Finishing his sermon, Jesus said to Peter, 'Let's go fishing.' He didn't change his clothes or get out of a black robe. Clearly, Jesus fished in the same clothing he had preached in.

I find Peter's reaction to this as interesting. When Jesus wanted to use Peter's boat for a pulpit, that was no problem. He was glad to shove off. But when Jesus wants to use Peter's boat for fishing, Peter protests. We can hear him saying, 'Hold on! We've been fishing all night and we caught nothing! There's no hope of catching anything now, what with the sun's slanting rays hitting the water and making the nets visible to the fish. Don't you know why we fish at night?' He implies that while Jesus may know something about preaching, he – Peter - knows about fishing!

Have you ever felt that way – that Jesus knows about spiritual things, the Kingdom of Heaven, God, and prayer, but when it comes to practical affairs, running your business or your household, that's where **you're** the expert! Peter had that problem. He was skeptical about Jesus' helpfulness on a fishing trip. But he agreed to give it a try, and off they went. The results were astounding – one of the truly “big fish” stories of all time!

I'm sure that ever after, Peter enjoyed telling this fish story. And that's what Jesus does. Jesus makes himself negotiable to us in terms we can understand. How better could he have impressed Peter than with a record catch of fish? Peter may have been enthralled or intrigued by Jesus' teaching, but his attention must have been caught by Jesus' expertise and visible results in a field where Peter was a specialist.

Some scholars have suggested the story here in Luke is simply an allegory. They tell us it really means that Peter would some day be catching great crowds of new converts. You can believe that. I myself don't accept that premise. I believe those were real fish. We're all too inclined to allegorize and spiritualize Scripture. I think that Jesus revealed his power to Peter in the most relevant way possible.

Peter's reaction was to fall to his knees and worship Jesus. “Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinner!” At last, Peter realized that Jesus was the Messiah. Peter, who had heard Jesus preaching and teaching, was convinced – was CONVICTED 9-- by the miracle of the fish. He understood at that point that Jesus was more than a great teacher or preacher. This was of God! He was of God.

And yet there are still those who insist that Jesus is just one among many spiritual guests. They are uninformed, to say the least. What does we do when we encounter God? C. S. Lewis deals with this in a magnificent way in *Mere Christianity* (1952). Lewis says that anybody who claims he is God (“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father,” John 14:9) is one of three things: 1) ‘he is a charlatan and a crook who is deliberately deceiving people, or 2) a loony who ought to be in an asylum, or – 3) he is who he says he is and we should all fall at his feet and call him Lord.’ As a teacher, Jesus was not saying much that was new or unusual. Many of the rabbis of his time were saying similar things about life and ethics. Only Jesus said, “The Father and I are one.” (John 10:30) Only Jesus gave people like Simon Peter the power of such divine experiences.

Peter, overwhelmed by who Jesus was, fell down, saying “Leave me, Lord!” And Jesus said, “Do not be afraid; from now on, you will be catching people.” In response to Jesus' challenge, Simon and the other fishermen left everything and followed him. It was a remarkable response to such an open-ended call. There was no time limit. Were they to follow him for a week, a month, a year? They left everything – even the biggest catch of their lives. They left their boats, their livelihood, and their families and they followed, and, as far as we know, not one ever went back.

They could not have known what they were called to at that point, but they might have had some understanding of what they were called from – the life they had -- perhaps from tedium or monotony, perhaps from what they loved.

For the longest time, I resonated strongly with Peter when he was first called by Jesus. Ten+ years ago, I truly ‘dropped my net’ to follow Jesus (leaving a 26+ year career at VISA USA, the bankcard company, with an excellent salary and benefits), not knowing where or to what it would take me. I sensed God was calling me into something new, but I never imagined (though others seemed to know, and had tried to tell me) that ministry of a different kind, shape, and way, was what lay ahead for me.

While there is an infinite variety of those things we are called from, we are all called to the same thing. We are called to big game hunting. We are called to go out and take people alive. The translation “to catch” is not accurate. The actual Greek word Jesus used means “to take alive, as taking animals alive for a zoo or circus.” It’s a much more attractive image, especially if you ignore the zoo and circus part. In fact, nobody wants to be caught. Too much evangelism is conducted that way. We maneuver people into signing a decision card or accepting “that plan of salvation.” Jesus was promising these early disciples that they would be taking people alive to be part of the Kingdom, and that’s exciting business. The verb tense used here describes an ongoing process. It’s not like deer-hunting, where you catch your limit for the season and quit until the next year. The “taking people alive” that Jesus speaks of is continuous and never-ending. Not like servitude. More like ownership.

Sometimes we think there are two kinds of Christians: those who catch the animals for the zoo and those who come to look at them. It’s not so. If we follow Christ, he tells us we will be involved in big-game hunting. What would be more thrilling than to begin to pursue those who don’t know Jesus and help them discover who he is in order that they might be saved from boredom or immorality or addiction or whatever their destiny would be apart from him? Have you ever wondered what you are going to do with the rest of your life? I have. After working for Visa those 25 years, the last year-and-a half of my bankcard career had me wondering more and more each day: What’s Next? What might God want to do with me for the rest of my life? It wasn’t quite the same experience as we hear from the prophet Isaiah, but it was close. “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I. Send me.”

“Taking people alive” for Jesus is central to the Christian’s vocation, and we as Christ’s disciples should be committed to never let a day go by when we aren’t “fishing for souls.”

The church is not a spectator society in which we go to the zoo. We are all called by commission through our baptism to be out there testifying to and trying to catch other souls, whoever we are, and wherever they may be. Jesus began with Peter, a fisherman. In fact – the way Luke describes Simon Peter, he was likely a very successful head of a fishing enterprise, but not a spiritual type. And Jesus continues to call all sorts and conditions of people. When we try to shake the hook or dodge the net, saying, “Lord, Leave Me for I am a sinner,” Jesus sees more in us and wants more for us.

There is no rule book for this kind of big-game hunting. One prerequisite is to love Jesus and to love the people you meet and talk to. Then pray for good things to overwhelm them. This is pre-evangelism. If their sick child is healed or their marriage is saved or if they catch enough fish, Jesus will have their attention. Then you can suggest they might want to meet the miracle worker himself. After all, it’s not our work that excites them.

Let them know Jesus is always asking us ‘What to do with the rest of your life?’ The challenge is to spend it as a big-game hunter, “taking people alive” for Jesus. I encourage you to not settle for anything less.

So, in closing, let me return to the humorous story involving the priest and the parking enforcement cop. While the priest confesses their transgression, the policeman holds the clergy accountable. This is one aspect of the call to discipleship. There are human consequences to our choices. But our living and gracious God, who loved us first and loves us still, despite our decisions, wants to forgive and redeem us. And both the priest and cop, each given authority for their respective vocations, look to and acknowledge that primary sovereign source of order and grace.

If you've ever been a St. George's camper, or known a St. George's camper, or parented one or – okay, Grace Church, a lot of you know about the song, "Me and Andrew," written by a camper at Shrine Mont a long while ago. It tells the story we heard in this gospel.

The last verse of the song is this:

James and John, they're both my witnesses
to the truth of what I've told.

How our nets were filled to busting
more than both our boats could ever hold.

And I fell down there before him
crying Leave me Lord, I'm full of sin!

He said, Simon, don't be frightened
Follow me, you'll learn to fish for men.

The chorus of the song is Come and Follow, repeated multiple times.
Hear what Jesus is saying to us all. Come and Follow Me.