

Pastor's Message – 2/6/2022

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Luke 5:1-11

Today, we hear a story from Luke's gospel in which Simon and his employees have been fishing all night and have caught nothing. This would be a terrible blow to fishermen who depend on selling what they catch to support their families and the families of their employees. They have worked hard all night but sometimes, like in any job, the sales don't come in and you hope tomorrow will be a better day.

Then Jesus, a carpenter (what does He know about fishing?) comes along, tells them to go back out, drop their nets again and, well, you know the rest of the story: the good news of the miraculous catch.

In a similar story in John 21, Jesus met Peter again after the Resurrection while he was fishing. In that meeting too, Jesus said, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in, because there were so many fish. It was full of large fish, with a count of 153. Fishermen counted when they caught fish. Counting blessings is what we do when we realize miracles.

Everyone on the scene of Luke 5 who could count were amazed at what they caught. Realizing your blessings can sometimes mean just being amazed. But there is more we need to do. Count your blessings! Give thanks.

But Simon was different. He fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Simon, also later known as Peter, acknowledged that Jesus is the Lord and that he (Peter) was a sinner. Simon had an encounter with Jesus and from there, his life was never the same.

Each of us encounter Jesus at different times in our lives – at different stages in our journey. Those meetings are at different points in their faith journeys. Perhaps you met Jesus in a Confirmation class or Sunday School class or some other study. Perhaps it was after that, during your adult life, or perhaps, Jesus has always been part of your life. Perhaps you are still watching and waiting.

On the back of your insert today, I've listed some possible points along the way. You may have checked them off already or perhaps sometime during this worship service or maybe later this week as you reflect on your call. Maybe you can list others. But at some point, you meet Jesus, hear His call, and have to choose how to respond. You might say thank you, Jesus, count your blessings, or respond as Simon did, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sin[ful]ner [man]!"

At some point, everyone realizes an invitation from God to be a disciple of Jesus and must make a choice, whether to follow or not, whether to lower the nets on the other side or pack them away for the day. There are people right in our church who may have wanted to be disciples but couldn't be – their families wouldn't let them and they couldn't leave those families behind. A parent, a spouse, or children said "No," so they didn't. Other activities, other priorities, other interests said "No," so they didn't.

There are other aspiring disciples who don't make it because they can't live with uncertainty. There are others who thought about being disciples, but stuff got in the way. They just love things too much – they might have been able to get by with less, but when the word came that discipleship is being all in, well that just didn't seem possible. There are others who wanted to be disciples, but this text stopped them cold: they, i.e., Jesus' first disciples, left **everything** and followed him.

Throughout the Bible, God seems to often call those we least expect. The suggested Old Testament reading for today is from the book of the prophet Isaiah. "... in the year King Uzziah died," Isaiah writes, "... I saw the Lord." In the face of God's majesty, Isaiah thinks he is doomed. Hearing the call from God, Isaiah initially says, "I am a man of unclean lips." Paul writes in his Letter to the Corinthians today, "I'm not even worthy to be called an apostle after the way I persecuted God's church." Simon says, "Lord, please leave me—I'm such a sinful man."

None of these Bible characters believed in themselves, but Paul continues, "yet it was not I but God who was working through me by his grace." None of us are perfect, we are all sinners, but God may still appear to us many times during the course of our faith lives and

give us a message to share. It is an important message entrusted to us with the grace of God.

What is that message? That Christ died for our sins? That he was buried? That he was raised on the third day? That he appeared to Peter and to the other apostles and disciples? That he appeared to Paul? That he can appear to you?

As Paul Harvey used to say, "And now you know the rest of the story." How important it is that we hear and that others hear through us the "rest of the story." But it's not really the conclusion. In a sense, Jesus' resurrection did not end the story, just as the crucifixion was not the end. In fact, Easter is open-ended. Jesus didn't disappear. He reappeared. He came back to make a number of "personal appearances" the Bible says. That means God is always able, at any time, to rewrite our life stories so that they come out right. Jesus appears to people many times during the course of their lifetimes.

That suggests to me that we can't stop telling the story. There is no end date to Jesus' call in our lives. We can't say at any point in our lives, "I am a person of unclean lips." "I'm not even worthy." "Lord, please leave me—I'm such a sinner." We don't have the option to say, "I'm too old" or "I'm too young" or "I don't know what to say" or "I've already given." There are some who still need to hear the good news of Jesus and you may be just the person to tell it at just the time they need to hear it.

What is that good news? The good news is that we have hope in this life and in the next. God is bigger than death and willing to give us a second chance. This is our story to share with all who need to hear it. Paul calls on the early church and on us to share this gospel, especially when times are tough, when people are unsure about the future, and when people are afraid. This is a message that will not disappoint.

Some demand proof. What is proof of the resurrection of Jesus? That the original disciples were eyewitnesses? That the risen Jesus appeared to them on eleven occasions during the 40 days following Easter? That the emphasis of their preaching was the resurrection? That they were literally transformed from cowering followers to courageous proclaimers of the resurrection, and that they were willing to go to the death for their beliefs that the tomb was empty?

That the church came into being? That Paul was converted from public enemy number one to primary missionary through an encounter with the risen Lord? For the most part, the disciples didn't really believe in the resurrection until they encountered the Risen Lord and knew him to be alive.

Clarence Jordan, the author of The Substance of Faith and Other Cotton Patch Sermons says, "The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, but the full hearts of his transformed disciples. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church."

Being a "carried-away church" means that we reflect God's desire for the best for us and for the world, showing God's desire in ways that partner with God in redeeming and sustaining wholeness and holiness in creation.

We are to be people liberated from prejudice or hatred, from anger, greed, violence, apathy, or self-service. We are to be people strong in generosity and compassion, in love, in holiness and mercy, reflecting the God in whose image we are created. We are to be people who act on behalf of justice, equity, and respect, on behalf of human dignity, on behalf of gentle interdependence with other species who share this world and with the earth itself. We are to be a people who show the love that Paul wrote about in our worship from last week focused on 1 Corinthians 13 to reflect God's tenderness toward all God has called into being and be God's hope for its health and abundance.

Jesus' resurrection is the promise that the God-power (which is God's image in us) will always be stronger than the brokenness of the world. It is the promise that the God-power will always be broader than the limitations of human possibility. It is the promise that, if we tell the story and commit ourselves to the good news that amazing things can happen. We may not have to count to 153 but telling the story can and will make a difference in people's lives.