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**Epiphany 5 – February 6, 2022**

**“From Empty Nets to Full Lives”**

**Read: Luke 5: 1 - 11/ Memorize Luke 5: 10 b**

Growing up I can remember the phrase, “I guess I’ll go eat worms,” which was said when you felt defeated or discouraged. I don’t remember its origin. We all have times of discouragement. What can we do in those circumstances? Our Gospel reading tells of a time when Jesus helped some men who felt that way. He’d met them before, when He was baptized. Apparently they’d returned to their day jobs, fishermen on the Sea of Galilee.

He meets them after a bad night of fishing. It was so bad they hadn’t caught anything. If you’re a recreational fisher, just being out on the lake may be fine, but if it’s your living, not so good. A night of empty nets is thoroughly demoralizing. Peter, James and John were able to share the misery together while they were washing the nets for the next night’s work.

Suddenly Jesus, the rising young teacher, stepped into Simon’s boat. “Put out a bit from the land,” He said to Simon. You see, the crowd He was so large that they were having trouble hearing Him, so he wanted to get in a better position to teach them. We don’t know what Jesus said or how long he taught. Nor is there any indication how much attention Peter, James and John had been paying to Jesus beforehand, but now they were captives.

What we do know is that when Jesus finished teaching, He asked them to “put out into the deep water and let down their nets for a catch.” I wonder what they thought at that moment. The professional fishermen were being asked by this landlubber to go fishing in the daylight in the lake where they caught no fish the night before.

Perhaps Jesus understood something? He saw that they were so demoralized that they were ready for any counsel. Or was it that he wanted to lift their spirits. Or did they had confidence in Him from their earlier contact.

Not to say that Peter didn't try to put Him off, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing!" That's the language of a defeated person, who doesn't want to experience any more defeat. But he doesn't stop there. He quickly added, "Yet, if you say so, I will let down the nets."

Simon seems to answer out of a spirit of, "I've tried everything else without success, why not try this?" Or was it that Jesus "spoke with authority?" Something in what or how Jesus spoke, led them to do it with unbelievable results.

Let down, the nets were so full that they had to enlist the help of the other boat crew that had been fishing with them. So their night of failure turned into glittering success, probably the greatest of their fishing career. It wasn't just the catch that was so satisfying, but the complete sense of turn around. Victory is always exhilarating, but especially when it's unexpected!

If this were the end of the story, it would seem to be a rather inconsequential miracle. It might even feed our desire for the gospel of success in business or school. Just do what Jesus says and you'll get a big reward. There are many who believe such a thing, but that would hardly be worthy of our Lord Jesus.

Fortunately, Peter saw something in this miracle. Rather than boasting, he pleaded for forgiveness. Sometimes, it is the experience of achievement which forces us to see how superficial our victories are. The truth is, a person may have full nets, but still have an empty life. We all likely know people like that.

It is sometimes said that the miracles of Jesus are parables in action; and they teach a lesson. Jesus doesn't let Peter dismiss what he's done but turns to him and says, "Do not be afraid." He told the frightened Simon Peter, "from now on you will be catching people." It was both the contrast and the reassurance Simon Peter needed.

What could be more dramatic than the difference between catching fish, making a living, and catching people, changing lives? Peter has spent his life fishing on the Galilee. He probably had no expectations beyond what might be envisioned within those boundaries. I doubt that he would have thought that something he wrote would be read by twenty-first century Christians.

Peter needed reassurance. As a matter of fact, he would need it time and time again. He would have to be told he was more than he ever imagined himself to be. But just now, when he felt so unworthy, it was electrifying to hear that the Master had work for him to do. He would not be rejected for his sins as he felt he surely he ought to be. Jesus has bigger things in mind for Simon Peter, a grand assignment, to become a fisher of people, one who would change lives for Jesus.

We face a similar problem. We set our boundaries and expectations of achievement too small in our service to our Lord. How will we handle the challenge that Jesus is giving us to live for Him in this world? Do we think little of Jesus' command that we should be perfect as our Father is perfect?

Do we discount those words as a kind of ancient hyperbole or push it away with self-deprecating laughter: "Perfect? Who, me?" I understand those feelings. At the same time, I don't want us to discount what God's grand purposes might be for us. Our Lord has something serious and possible in mind when He calls us to the goal of making disciples.

The promise of heaven should inspire us to greater outreach in the here and now. Have we taken seriously enough our potential for those fruits of the Spirit that Paul lays out for us in Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and self-control are such beautiful qualities and ones we are glad to find in others? Why don't we pursue them more hopefully and expectantly in ourselves? Is the problem that we have set boundaries on ourselves as confining as the Sea of Galilee was for Peter?

The fact that Peter had tipped His toes in the water by seeking out John and then went back to the Sea of Galilee leads me to wonder something. Perhaps Peter would have been content to spend his nights on the Galilee, doing what his family had done for generations. After all, someone had to catch the fish. A person should not too quickly place too small a boundary around his or her soul.

It's easy to get caught up in the miracle and miss the point. Jesus is calling Peter, James, John, you and me to become fishers of people. Many we're uneasy with the whole concept of soul winning. We have this image of people button-holing others on the street, which rarely works.

Is our problem that we think witnessing only happens when we intentionally talk about Jesus, rather than just being part of our lives? Think about how Jesus does

it. He meets people like Nicodemus, a Samaritan woman and lots of others as he moves around. And it's interesting how Jesus treats each of them. They were persons to Jesus, not just people to be met with a formula to accomplish His goal.

Witnessing is conversations and actions. When we show who we are and to whom we belong, even in relatively minor ways, we are witnessing. It might be as simple as this: I was talking with one of my daughter's-in-law and I made an offhand comment about Roxann and I doing a devotion each evening. She asked me, "What's a devotion?" So I got to talk with her about it. By her question, she opened the door for conversation.

So perhaps the issue is not looking for opportunities, but taking the opportunities that God gives us to be a witness. We think it needs to be grand. It may well be that we need to be more sensitive to the world around us and to the subtle prodding of the Holy Spirit. Those two sensitivities are wonderfully intertwined: to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit means that we will be more sensitive to people and their pain; which makes us more open to God and His purposes.

Perhaps think of it this way: every human soul is a collection of fears, joys, strengths, weaknesses, sins and goodness. God is able to meet the human soul at any of these points. When we have the love of Jesus in us, God enables us to touch lives for Him by "Sharing Christ, Changing Lives!"