

The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany (C)  
February 7, 2010  
Texts: Isaiah 6:1-8  
Luke 5:1-11

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When I was growing up, every summer I used to travel back to Kansas to stay with my grandparents. They were farmers who lived in southeastern Kansas near a small town called Fredonia. I loved spending time on the farm. Growing up in the city, it was an adventure every summer to explore the barn and the grain silo, to watch the chickens strutting around through the yard looking for bugs to eat, to feed the cows and ride the horse. But more fun than anything else was going fishing in the pond in the pasture.

It was a good sized pond, maybe about the size of a city block. My grandfather kept the pond stocked with bullhead catfish. They weren't big, but they were really fun to catch. You didn't have to be a good or patient fisherman because the fish would bite almost as soon as you threw your line in. And once they'd taken the hook, even though they were pretty small fish, they gave a great fight. Being 5 or 6 years old, it was very exciting to reel in a fish that was fighting hard and bending my fishing pole. And once in a while, one of them would get away.

The best part was eating them. We'd bring a string of fish home. My grandmother would clean them and skin them. Then she'd coat them in flour and cook them in a big, heavy cast-iron skillet on the stove. The wonderful smell of freshly-caught fish cooking would fill the house, along with corn bread muffins and green beans from the garden. Then we'd sit down to dinner. On a big platter in the middle of the table would be a whole pile fish with a crispy brown coating on the outside and flakey white meat on the inside. I can almost smell it now.

And that memory of those beautiful fish on the platter is one of the reasons I've always been a little hesitant about using the image of "fishing for people" as a way of picturing giving witness to Christ and welcoming people into the family of God. Who would want to wind up alongside the green beans and corn on the cob? It's never seemed to me to be the best way to picture our relationship with God, or to suggest why we would ever invite anyone else to join us as members of this community.

However, when Luke tells this story, he gives his own unique twist to this image of "fishing for people." In the Matthew and Mark it can sound a bit like Simon Peter and his companions have been catching fish for a living, but now at Jesus' command they will fish for people. But Luke uses a different word. Jesus says, "From now on you will be *catching* people." In Greek the word means "to catch alive," even "to rescue." Luke wants us to see that out of the dark and chaotic waters of life, Jesus catches us up out of despair and self-preoccupation. Jesus hauls us out of a life that is really no life at all, rescuing

us from futility and emptiness so that we might live with God. This is the good work that Jesus calls Simon to be part of. This is why Simon and his companions leave everything and follow Jesus—to catch people alive and rescue them by the grace of God.

And the marvelous thing is, before this is a story about Jesus calling Simon Peter to catch people alive, first it is a story about Simon *being caught*—being caught by the powerful and commanding presence of the Son of God. Peter had been a fisherman his whole life. He knew that if they had worked hard all night long, during the best fishing hours, and caught nothing, going out during the heat of the day would not somehow make it better. But rather than make a big fuss about it, when Jesus tells him to lower the nets, he lowers the nets. And when the nets are filled with fish, almost to the breaking point, Peter has to summon his partners in the other boat. And the catch is so large that both boats are filled with fish, so much so that both are in danger of sinking. And then Peter knows that this is no ordinary teacher in his boat, and this is no ordinary human power at work. He has been caught up in something greater than he can fully understand, but he understands enough to say to Jesus, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” But Jesus says to him, “Do not be afraid.”

It’s a bit like the story of Isaiah in our Old Testament reading. Isaiah was a priest in the temple in Jerusalem. Like Peter, he’d been at his craft a long time. Who knows how many times he had been to the temple, heard the choir sing, seen worship and sacrifice offered to God. But on this one day it was as if the curtain was pushed back. Isaiah was caught up in a mystical vision of the presence of God. He saw the might and power of God, towering over the tiny words and actions of people. He heard the heavenly choir singing praise to God. And Isaiah knew that he did not belong there. He was terrified because he knew that he was a sinner. But in this vision, God does not punish him because of his sin. Instead, God takes away his guilt, burning away his sin, making him clean and pure.

We live our whole lives in the presence of God, but most of the time we probably don’t see it. God fills all of creation, but we go about our daily routines blissfully unaware. But still we carry with us a hunger and thirst to know God, to experience the presence of God. Perhaps that’s what brings us here—we want to experience God. We don’t want to just do churchy things and say religious words. We want to be caught up in the presence of the living God. We want to know that there is more to our lives than just these daily routines of eat and work and sleep.

And I do not doubt that God can and does and will meet us, speak to us—although we may not find that it happens on our timetable, according to our schedule, or in ways we expect. A number of years ago, during an especially challenging time, I wasn’t sure about what I should be doing, about the direction of my life. I went to church on Christmas Eve. And during the

celebration of Holy Communion, I received the bread, and as I took the large cup of wine, I saw my reflection in the bottom of the cup. And somehow in that instant I knew that the risen Christ was with me, holding me and embracing me with all of my doubts and all of my limits. I knew that the risen Christ did not see me defined by any of my faults or failings. Instead, Christ saw me in the light of God's mercy and forgiveness. I knew that I had been caught up in God's love, so that my life was truly no longer my own, but now I belonged to God.

And God desires to catch you too, to meet you, speak to you—in the time and manner and place of God's choosing, of course. It may be in your home, in the few minutes of quiet you can squeeze in at the end of the day, as you open your heart to God in prayer. It may be in the beauty of creation, that God speaks to you through the grandeur of the natural world. Or maybe in worship, the words you sing will become God's word spoken to your spirit. Or maybe through the words of scripture God's Spirit will speak to your spirit. Or as you receive the bread and wine of Holy Communion, as you hear that this is Christ's body given for you, the blood of Christ shed for you, perhaps you'll know it is the living God who calls to you. It is the risen Christ who touches you with forgiveness.

And after being caught up in God's love, then you will be sent out. You will be sent out to be a sign of God's mercy and goodness for others. You will be sent out so that other people can be caught alive, rescued from futility and emptiness. You'll be sent out so that, perhaps through the care you show for others, they can receive an expression of God's care; through the forgiveness you offer for others, they can receive a glimpse of God's forgiveness; through the service you give to neighbors in need, they can receive a hint of God's loving embrace. Christ continues to call people like Simon (and like you and me) to be part of his work. And Christ also continues to fill the nets, to draw people to the witness we give, so that they too might be caught up in the love of God and experience life that is deep and true—life in the eternal embrace of God. Thanks be to God. Amen