

Epiphany 5 (C)
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Text: Luke 5:1-11

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It strikes me as slightly ironic that, although our gospel story tells about Peter hauling in a miraculous catch of fish," it's actually more about Peter himself being caught by Jesus. Peter experienced something about Jesus that drew him in and wouldn't let him go. Peter recognized that, in Jesus, he had encountered something so powerful and compelling that he had to follow. He was simply hooked. And I wonder whether the best way to appreciate this story is through our own experience, through reflecting on what it is that draws us to Jesus. Because I imagine that every one of us has our own "miraculous catch of fish" story, even if it has nothing at all to do with fish. So I thought I might share a little about what initially drew me to Jesus, and what continues to draw me to Jesus. As I look back over my life, it seems that there are three especially significant ways I've experienced being drawn to Jesus, and I wonder if you've experienced something similar.

Even though I was baptized as a baby and attended church with my family all while growing up, it wasn't until well into my teens that I'd say that church began to mean something to me personally. The trip through my teens was a fairly bumpy ride, and especially in school I experienced a lot of really crappy human behavior. But church was where I felt valued, where I felt safe, where I experienced a community that was all about love. When I experienced grace and hope and freedom, it was always connected to Jesus. And I was hooked. I wanted to know more. I wanted to feel like I understood the Bible when I read it. I wanted to reach more deeply into this mystery that is life with God. That was what led to studying Greek and Hebrew, and eventually led to seminary, and finally to becoming a pastor. It all started, though, with being hooked by Jesus, with experiencing Jesus' compassion through the church and feeling a sense of belonging there. And I wonder if Christian community and the love of God's people has played an important role in drawing you to Jesus. I wonder if you've ever felt a deep sense of belonging in a congregation, where relationships with other people helped you know God's love for you.

Another thing that really spoke to me was the Bible. There had always been a tinge of perfectionism about my experience of church. I heard the church's message as "God loves good people, so you'd better be good." But toward the end of college, I was introduced to Martin Luther's teachings, and through them to St. Paul, who wrote so many books of the Bible. And for the first time I really heard that God's love is unconditional, that in Jesus, I am made right with God, and it's all a gift. Life with God

isn't based on anything I'm capable of doing or producing. It's all grace. And that was incredibly liberating. I experienced Jesus as the one who's gift of love means that in the end, there is no judgment, no condemnation. And again, I was well and truly hooked. And I wonder if you've heard the Christian message as such profoundly good news that it makes your heart sing, that it set's your spirit free. I wonder what it is about God's good news that makes you feel fully alive.

These days, Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness and love of enemies has been really making sense to me. It's Jesus' teaching that has been drawing me in. We live in such an anxious time, and there are so many reasons for that anxiety. It's not just the social unrest and political polarization. It also that some of the biggest, most life-threatening issues facing the world right now—climate change and the pandemic—have been made so much more complicated by hate and disinformation. The degree to which people are suspicious and hostile toward each other is astounding, and the possibility for violence is frightening. I am convinced that the only way forward for the human family is through Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness and love of enemies. Jesus shows us the only way for healing relationships. Jesus shows us the only way that won't lead us further down into estrangement and social disintegration. I am completely hooked by Jesus' wisdom, by his vision for how God is making humanity whole. And I wonder if you've heard Jesus' message as the greatest reason to hope that there is a way out of the mess we're in. I wonder if you've felt drawn in by Jesus' way of love as the one way to life and blessing and peace.

When Luke pictures for us Peter hauling in that huge, miraculous catch of fish, he's wanting us to recognize what we already know about Jesus—that in Jesus there is something "more," something "beyond" everything we think we know about how life works and what really matters. In the story, that amazing haul of fish—so many that they made Peter worry his boat would sink—they are hint of God's deep grace and power present in Jesus, grace and power so big, so incomprehensibly huge, that it's even a little unnerving. For Peter all those fish made it clear that Jesus wasn't just like everyone else. He wasn't just a teacher, just a healer. He was "more." Much, much more! For us, it might be easier than it was for Peter to see Jesus this way. We know Jesus now after the resurrection. We know that not even death can stop Jesus, that Jesus has led the way for us through death into something beyond, into a new life with God. In the present, following Jesus looks like living a genuinely human life—one that is humane, one that is deeply meaningful because it is rooted in love and is shaped by compassion and forgiveness. Following Jesus is how we reach deeply into becoming the best, most fully alive person we can be. And in the future, beyond this life, we follow Jesus into a mystery, into God's loving embrace, into a new life that is more than anything we can even imagine.

For Peter, the huge catch of fish was what made it possible for him to really see Jesus, and that led him to an entirely new path in life. And when we really see Jesus also, see him in a way that draws us in, that will change our path in life too. When we know in our bones that Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness is the only way to a genuinely human life, and that love is the only thing that matters, that will affect our priorities and values and choices. We might begin to recognize that some paths in life—some self-serving paths in life, or even some self-destructive paths—they are just dead ends. Peter and his companions left their nets and their boats behind in order to follow Jesus. I wonder what you are leaving behind. I wonder what decisions you make that require some sacrifice on your part, but you do it because it is the right thing to do, or the compassionate thing to do, or the forgiving thing to do, or the generous thing to do. I wonder if you have found yourself making a break with some part of your past because you want what Jesus wants for you.

When Jesus called Peter to follow him, it was so that Peter would become part of Jesus' ongoing work. Through Peter, still more people would experience that something "more" about Jesus that would draw them in and make them want to know more—whether it was belonging or forgiveness or acceptance or freedom or hope. And the same is true for us. The message of Jesus, the good news that gives us peace and strength and hope, isn't just for each of us individually. It's for the healing of God's whole beloved creation. I wonder if you've ever felt that the world needs what you have. It does. The world needs you to be God's person right where you are, making God's love visible in your neighborhood and your relationships. The world needs you to be a hint of something more, of grace that is comforting and liberating and full of hope. However it is that Jesus has drawn you in with his life-giving word, the only way ahead is by saying yes, by saying "Here I am, send me," and then following Jesus in his way of love. Amen.