

Epiphany 5C, 2010

Text: Luke 5:1-11

Title: Where are the fish?

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So what happened to all the fish?

Did you ever wonder that? What happened to all the fish in today's gospel?

Peter's nets were so full of fish, that the nets were starting to break. When they finally managed to haul the nets up, they needed another boat just to hold them all, and even then the boats were so weighed down, that they were starting to sink.

This was the catch of a lifetime. This is the kind of catch that Peter, James and John dreamed about. This was the kind of catch that you would tell stories about to your children and your grandchildren for years and years. Come here, kids, and let me tell you about the miraculous catch of fish.

Peter not only lived to fish, he fished to live. He made his living off the sea. Most likely it was the family business, something that they had been doing for generations.

It was a risky business. You never knew for sure where the fish would be or if you'd be able to catch them.

It was a risky business, but Peter, James and John did all right. Sometimes the fishing was bad, sometimes the fishing was good. But they had never had a catch like this.

It had started with an innocent request. Jesus wanted to borrow their boat. The crowd was getting big, and Jesus knew that his voice would carry across the water, so he asked Peter if he could take him out a little ways from the shore to teach the crowd.

Peter and Jesus had met earlier. Jesus had been the guest preacher at Peter's church there in Capernaum. After church, Jesus went home with Peter, and had healed his mother-in-law.

So Peter figured the least he could do in return was let him have the use of his boat for an hour or so.

When Jesus finished up his sermon, he asked another favor. Let's go fishing. Let's head out in the deep waters and put down the nets.

Now Peter knew better. He was an experienced fisherman. Peter knew that the time to fish was at night. And the place to fish was close to the shore. At night, the fish moved into the cooler, shallow waters close to the shore. Peter fished with a net, and it's much easier to catch fish in shallow water. Peter was not a deep-sea fisherman.

So, with a smirk on his face, Peter says, “Well, if you say so (even though I know better),” and he takes Jesus out into the deep water. Surely this carpenter turned preacher didn’t know anything about fishing, but Peter decides to humor him this once. If nothing else, they would have a relaxing afternoon out on the water.

In the end, the joke was on Peter. They actually caught fish, more fish than Peter had ever caught before. Peter had spent all night fishing, and used all his skill and experience and caught nothing. And here this preacher caught a huge haul in the most unlikely way.

Peter knows that it’s a miracle. He knows that this is not just beginner’s luck. Peter knows that only God could do something like this. What’s interesting, is that Peter barely reacts when Jesus healed his mother-in-law (after all, it’s just a fever, those come and go). But when Jesus starts hauling in all the fish, Peter knows who Jesus is.

Notice how Peter talks to Jesus. When Jesus asks Peter to go fishing, Peter calls him “Master.” It’s a polite way to talk, kind of like using “sir” in English. “Yes, sir, whatever you say.”

But after the fish have been caught, Peter calls Jesus “Lord.” This is “Lord God Almighty” language. This is “Holy, Holy. Holy is the Lord God of hosts.” This is the name Isaiah uses for the Lord who’s in His temple, surrounded by angels.

And Peter’s afraid.

Peter knows that he’s a sinner, and is unfit to stand in Jesus’ presence, just like Isaiah was. It’s not that he’s just a fisherman, Peter is a sinner. He is unclean. The safest thing to do is to get far, far away.

It’s a fearful thing to stand in the Lord’s presence. You’re meeting the Lord of heaven and earth right here. The same song the angels sang, “Holy, Holy, Holy” still echoes in these walls. This is where heaven comes down to earth.

When you come here every week, when you approach the Lord’s altar, are you afraid? Do you ever wonder if you’ll survive the experience, if you’ll live to tell about it? You’re a sinner, too, just like Isaiah, just like Peter. None of us are fit to stand in the Lord’s presence. Fear and trembling are natural.

But the Lord does not come to destroy us. He did not destroy Isaiah. He did not destroy Peter, and He will not destroy you.

Peter asked Jesus to leave. But Jesus would have none of that. Instead of leaving, Jesus calls him, and the rest of the crew, to come along with him. He’s got something better for them. He’s got bigger plans than just catching fish. Jesus promises to make the fishermen, fishers of men.

I’m sure that Peter was tempted to say, “No. Let’s stay here and fish for fish. With your power and my business skills, we can make a killing. We can start our own fishing business.”

But no, Peter leaves everything, everything behind to follow Jesus. He leaves the boats. He leaves the nets. He even leaves the fish. Those fish were money in the bank. He could have stayed and sold them for an enormous sum. He could have fed his family, even the whole town for months. But instead he left them behind.

So what happened to the fish? Did someone else take them? Did they sit there and rot? What happened to them?

We never find out, because there are more important things than fish. Jesus has much more important things to do than to sort out a bunch of fish. He's out to save the world and He wants Peter and his friends to come along and lend a hand.

We often have issues sorting out our priorities. Things that seem so important to us now are not really important in the end.

I want to tell you a little about one of my friends, whom I met in the course of my studies.

He was married, and they were blessed with two children, a son and a daughter. He and his wife were very successful. His job involved overseeing the management of hospitals all across the country, and so he was on the road a lot. His wife had an excellent job in the medical field, too, and worked long hours.

Before long, they had more money than they knew what to do with. He took up flying, and even bought his own plane. Eventually, his wife got transferred to a different office in another city, and so she moved, but he stayed put. He and his wife were living in different cities and barely saw one another, but they were very successful.

Their wake-up call came when their son committed suicide. They had spent so much time and energy in their careers, that they neglected their family. At that point nothing else mattered. They would have given everything- the money, the houses, the planes, just to have their son back.

As you can imagine, their life changed drastically. They quit their jobs and become reconnected to a church. He decided he wanted to teach people about Jesus, and he's now a professor at a small college.

It took an unimaginable tragedy, but they now have their priorities straight. They've left the fish there on the beach and are following Jesus.

I spent much of the day on Friday with the Green family, first watching Joyce's life slip away, and then trying to deal with her death.

We talked about a lot of things on Friday- the important things- about what Jesus has done for us and the hope that we have in him. We talked about how Jesus calls us to faith, how he strengthens us through His word and His body and blood. We talked about everything that the Lord had done for Joyce and how He had blessed her throughout her life, and we talked about how Bob and the rest of her family were going to get through the difficult days ahead. We talked

about the important things. We didn't talk about things like money and possessions. We certainly didn't talk about fishing.

Think for a moment about what's holding you back. What's keeping you from following Jesus? What's keeping you from coming to church regularly to be with the Lord? What's keeping you from coming to Bible Class to study God's word? What's keeping you from giving generously to the Lord? What's keeping you from talking to your friends and family about Jesus?

When your last hour comes, what will be important to you then? There are so many things that we think are so important today, that will be as worthless as a pile of fish.

Jesus calls us to something better- catching people instead of fish. Using the gifts we've been given to serve Him and those around us and not to serve ourselves.

It's not easy. It's not easy to leave your old life behind to follow Jesus. It's not easy to put Jesus first. It's much easier to put yourself first. It's much easier to send Jesus away and keep fishing.

But Jesus wants you with Him. He wants you to come along for the fun and to be a part of His work. Jesus is doing a new kind of fishing, and he want you in the boat with him.

So don't let anything hold you back. Don't let anything get between you and Jesus.

The fish weren't important. It doesn't really matter what happened to the fish. People matter. Jesus has come to save people, and to call them to follow him.