

Sunday, February 10 and Wednesday, February 13, 2019
Third Sunday after the Epiphany + Luke 5:1-11, Isaiah 6:1-8
“Catching People (Alive)”

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In this month’s *Living Lutheran*, the magazine of the ELCA, our presiding bishop is talking again about numbers. Nearly half our congregations average 50 or fewer in worship each week. Far more clergy are retiring than are coming up through our seminaries. Each year the ELCA loses 70,000 members—a statistic I find hard to believe, but if Bishop Eaton says it, then it must be true.

It’s been a steady trend. For decades, some of the best minds have been trying to figure out how to turn things around. But has anyone considered that, in our culture of comfort, people might simply be thinking that church is just too hard? Too hard to make time for? Too hard to budget for? Too hard to squeeze in between the kids’ sports activities? Too hard to hear the gospel read, preached, and sung?

Church is *supposed* to be hard. If people find it easy, then someone is not doing their job. The gospel challenges us to the core. It calls us to live in ways radically opposed to the culture around us. Self-gratification is no longer the goal, but self-emptying. Humility replaces pride. Charity replaces greed. Hope replaces fear.

We must recalibrate everything world has taught us. In his death, God’s Son took the full weight of our sin upon himself, wiping our slate clean, so that our lives might be redeemed. The world says you dug your hole, now live in it. The gospel says that, no matter what, you are loved, forgiven, and free.

Following the call to discipleship requires tremendous strength. This strength is one of two reasons why Jesus called fishermen to be his first disciples. Being a fisherman was a stressful and consuming occupation. They worked year-round in the heat of summer and the cold of winter. Because the nets were invisible to fish at night, fishermen spent all night working these heavy nets. Daytime hours were taken up with the hard work of washing, drying, and mending the nets, which had to be carefully cleaned and dried each day or they would rot. In fact, that's what Peter, James and John were doing when Jesus first sees them—washing their nets.

Jesus chose fishermen as his first disciples because he knew that what lay ahead would take everything they had. There would be no down time. They'd always be on the move, following instructions they didn't really understand, teaching things they didn't really understand, orienting their entire lives around something they didn't really understand. Only after Jesus' death did they finally get it.

Being a disciple also meant going against the culture in stressful ways, such as leaving their families and never looking back. Later in Luke's Gospel Jesus says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

Following Jesus and orienting our lives around the gospel is hard work for us, too. We don't have to leave our families, but it means a major reorientation of our lives. There is no down time. There are no days off. Discipleship requires vigilance in the face of opposition, perseverance in the face of exhaustion, the conviction of hope in the face of the constant temptation to give up and to give in.

And why persevere? Why come to church? Why not just be a solitary disciple?

Because coming to church and fortifies this body of Christ and its many members for service. Here, Jesus gives us the nourishment that we need to truly live. “Do not work for the food that perishes,” Jesus says in John 6, “but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” The food that endures is God’s mercy—forgiveness that we do not deserve, love that we have not earned. The church is the body through which we cultivate that food. God strengthens our faith through Word and Sacrament so that we may share the food that endures for the sake of the world that God so loves.

Being a disciple also means throwing away the old rulebook of fear and replacing it with obedience to Jesus’ call. Be prepared for common sense to get in the way, just like it did for Simon Peter. When Jesus instructs him to go out into deeper water, initially he resists. “Master, we have worked all night and caught nothing!” he says, perhaps wearily. But Simon obeys, and when he sees magnitude of the miraculous catch, he is overwhelmed with remorse. Not only did he resist Jesus at first, but he feels utterly unworthy of being the recipient of divine action. But in God’s kingdom there is no such thing as unworthiness. Grace, God’s undeserved mercy, is constantly falling upon all of us, grace upon grace.

Jesus chose fishermen for a second reason. Here in Luke, success in fishing is a prophetic symbol for the mission in which Peter and the other disciples will participate. But there is an important distinction between catching fish and catching people. Fish are

caught to die. But the word “catching” here actually means capturing, or catching alive. Fish are caught to die, but people are caught to live.

How do we, as the body of Christ, catch people? Well, the first way is by inviting them to church. It’s a known fact that the vast majority of new members join a church because someone invited them. So why don’t we do this more often? Because it’s hard work! To that end, I hope you won’t mind if I share this this two-minute video I came across:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-463R6_Xbw

Let’s go fishing!

Amen.