

January 26, 2025
Luke 5:1-11
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Eight years ago, on a Sunday a lot like this one, I preached my first sermon as your minister. It too was the Sunday after the presidential inauguration. Originally, I wasn't planning to preach that Sunday, I was just getting settled and thought I might ease into things. But I changed my mind because I had some things to say about good leadership. Since it was my first sermon, I thought it would be good to tell you what I value in leadership and introduce you to the kind of leader I would be. I talked about the importance of character, consistency, and integrity. In that sermon, I said, "I will always side with the person or people who are vulnerable, and I will always choose compassion and justice, and you can count on me to try to welcome and include everyone." I hope I have shown you that I am that kind of leader.

Over the years, I have watched the people in this congregation be that kind of leader in this community. You have sided with people who are unsheltered, people who are food insecure, people who are poor, people of color, immigrants, and the Queer Community. You know what good leaders do and what they do not do. This is your reminder that no matter who is in the White House, this standard for good leadership does not change. It is very important that we remember and continue to remind our neighbors what good leadership looks like. We cannot allow the bar to be lowered. We cannot allow cruelty, greed, and dishonesty to be the norm and ignore it. And we cannot allow poor leadership to impact what kind of leaders we are. In the words of Bishop Marion Edgar Budde, "I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now." I know that you will.

There are many belief systems represented in this room and many places from which to draw wisdom. This winter, we look to the Gospel of Luke for that wisdom. You will remember that we began this series with the story of 12-year-old Jesus in the temple at the end of chapter 2. That's the only story of Jesus as an adolescent in the biblical text, so the author of Luke fast-forwarded his narrative to Jesus as an adult, but not before we were reminded of the importance of keeping ourselves focused on being who we say we are and doing what we say we are going to do. In chapters 3 and 4, Jesus was baptized by John, affirmed by God, tested in the wilderness, and began teaching in Galilee.

He taught in the synagogues around Galilee and the people he encountered liked what they heard. He was the bearer of good news for the people who began to follow him from place to place. The good news was that there would come a time when the Israelites would be free from oppression by the Roman Empire. The people were tired of being afraid, tired of being poor, and tired of bearing the consequences of a system in which the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. They lived in a

world where it was clear that the people in charge had no mercy for the ones who were making their over-the-top lifestyle possible.

Last week, we read the story of Jesus teaching at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. Unfortunately, his message was not as well received because he extended this good news to all people and not just the Israelites. I reminded us that good news isn't good news unless it is so for everyone. So, Jesus left and went to Capernaum where the author of this gospel tells us he performed miracles and even healed a fisherman named Simon's mother-in-law. Unlike the people in Nazareth, the people in Capernaum wanted him to stay, but he moved on. And that brings us to today's text.

This morning's story from Luke 5 gives us our first glimpse at Jesus as a leader. In this story, he calls his first disciples. You may be surprised at what he called them to do. This is Luke 5:1-11.

Once while Jesus was standing beside the Lake of Gennesaret and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, 2 he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gotten out of them and were washing their nets. 3 He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. 4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." 5 Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." 6 When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to burst. 7 So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. 8 But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus's knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" 9 For he and all who were with him were astounded at the catch of fish that they had taken, 10 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." 11 When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

The Sea of Galilee called the Lake of Gennesaret in this story, is a body of fresh water in Israel 13 miles long and seven miles wide. Since biblical times, the sea has been a source of protein for the surrounding land and beyond. According to the ancient Jewish historian Josephus, there were more than 230 fishing boats working the sea in the early first century. Fisherman were on the lowest level of Rome's hierarchy of occupations. "They owned no land, and they were forced to pay for both the right to fish on the emperor's lake and the right to sell the fish they caught. There was a toll exacted on each catch. Their work was physically demanding and dangerous, often leaving them with barely enough money to sustain their families." (Leah D. Schade, Working Preacher Commentary on Luke 5:1-11)

On this day, not only did the fisherman not make money, they lost money. Whether they caught something or not, they had to pay to fish and they hadn't caught anything.

Nobody was more familiar with the way things worked from an economic perspective than the fisherman. And because of this, we can assume they were very receptive to Jesus' message. The way things were in the first-century Mediterranean world was not working for these fishermen and their families. They were open to hearing something new.

When Jesus saw the men cleaning their nets with no fish in sight, he would have known that the only thing they had gained that day was more debt and he must have known this was an opportunity. These guys needed some good news. Here, we meet my favorite disciple, Peter. I think the way I've described Peter before is that he was a bull in a china shop kind of guy and a champion blurter. If he thought something, more often than not, he blurted it out. In this story, Peter's initial skepticism turned to curiosity so he did what Jesus suggested and cast his nets again. He probably thought, "What do I have to lose at this point?"

Whether you believe this is a miracle that actually occurred or, like me, you think it was the product of the author's imagination, the point is that in the story the fish serve as a symbol of abundance to a group of worn-out, desperate, frustrated fishermen. Abundance was not something they experienced very often. Those overflowing nets cast hope into the hearts of the men and helped them see the possibility that their lives could be different. So when Jesus invited them to do something new, they were all in. Again, what did they have to lose?

This scenario has been acted out again and again throughout history. People are miserable. They can see no way out of their misery. A leader comes along and inspires them and gives them hope and they follow that leader. There isn't anything wrong with that, in fact, it's a good thing, unless the leader cares more about their own interests than their followers' interests. And unless the leader says and does things that cause the people to turn on one another. Think Hitler. Think of religious leaders who convince their congregations that people who don't believe what they believe are the enemy. Good leaders love all the people they lead, even the ones who disagree with them. Good leaders infuse hope where there is desperation, and good leaders invite their followers to be part of making what they hope for a reality.

Jesus invited the fisherman to join him saying, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." Traditional Christianity has long interpreted this story as a call to invite people to church, give out religious tracts and pamphlets, or stand on the street corner yelling "repent." The prophetic tradition from the Hebrew Bible suggests another interpretation though. Both the books of Jeremiah and Amos use fishing imagery to talk about upending the status quo of wealth and power disparities. In Jeremiah, God expresses disgust at the self-serving practices of the elite by saying, "I am now sending many fishermen ---they shall catch them---for my eyes are on all their ways..." In Amos, the prophet describes God's response to those who oppress the

poor and crush the needy. He writes, "They will be taken away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks."

In his book, *The Green Good News*, theologian and writer T. Wilson Dickinson writes, "to be made 'fishers of men' is to be agents of justice who will fish out and remove the elite who have oppressed the poor and broken covenant with God." All of this to say, fishing for people is not about saving souls for Jesus or convincing people they must believe certain things or go to hell. Jesus didn't call Peter and the gang to that. He called them to rise up against the ones who oppressed the vulnerable and the ones who worshiped money and power. And if the stories of Jesus mean anything to us today, we must believe we are called to the same work.

If you've been paying attention, you know that there is plenty of that work for us to do. And dear ones, we have to do the work together. Moments like this are the reasons we talk about being held together by common purpose, not common belief. We don't have to believe the same things about God or Jesus to know that the mass deportation of immigrants is evil and cruel. We don't have to understand our weekly gathering at the communion table the same way to know that efforts to erase trans people are not acceptable. We don't have to understand the complexities of the economy the same way to see that the most vulnerable among us are struggling to make ends meet. I could go on. The point is, now is the time to work together to do the good that is ours to do.

We must continue to serve the people who are suffering because, quite frankly, what's been happening in our community, state, and nation for a long time is really only serving rich, white, straight, cisgender, men. If we are to be fishers of people, let us make the "net"work...let us be a network of people who value people more than power, justice more than judgment, and mercy more than money. Let us be a community of people who will do what it takes to ease the suffering of our most vulnerable neighbors. One neighbor at a time.

At DCC, we will continue to support our neighbors who are food insecure by providing a 24-7 food pantry that doesn't require them to give their names or prove they need help. We will continue to grow vegetables and give them away. We will continue to donate 10% of our giving to our community partners. We will help our neighbors who are living on the edge stay in their homes by paying for utilities and helping with gas for their cars. We will continue to teach our young people that the way we treat people is the best reflection of what we believe about God and what we believe about human beings. We will continue to welcome everyone who seeks to love and be loved no matter what their faith tradition or spiritual practices are. This will be a safe place for people to land.

And last, we will be a congregation of community leaders who lead from a place of love. Y'all, we cannot lead from a place of bitterness and fear. We cannot be part of

the hateful rhetoric being spewed. Jesus was a good leader because he loved people, and he cast a vision for a world in which everyone had enough, everyone had a place to belong, and everyone was safe. Good news is not good news if it isn't good news for everyone. We can and should call out bad leadership, but we have to be willing to fill the vacuum. If that (whatever that is) is bad leadership then we have to provide good leadership. And it starts here. It starts with the people in this room. I will end as Bishop Budde ended her sermon on Tuesday, "May God grant us the strength and courage to honor the dignity of every human being, to speak the truth to one another in love and walk humbly with each other and our God for the good of all people. Good of all people in this nation and the world. Amen"