

Sermon – February 6, 2022  
“I will let down the nets”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Luke 5:1-11

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we love others with you in your mission. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

No matter how long it has been since I held a net, the feel of one in my hands or even seeing one always brings back such great memories. Not so much of the long nights out on the water, though there were beautiful moments when the stars seemed so close that one might reach up and touch them with the hand, but what I remember most is the greatest catch of fish I experienced. It happened after one of those nights when the fishing was beyond challenging. A night when we rowed to a place where we normally catch fish, let down the nets, and when we pulled them up, they came up empty; time after time, all night long. We had gone to all of the places we knew the fish stayed at that time of year and there was nothing. Every time we let down the nets, they came up empty, just filled with grass and weeds we would have to wash out later. We were tired, and had no fish to sell, nothing to show for a night of hard labor. We fished until the light of day was breaking, the time when the fish could see the nets. We had fished until there was no chance of a catch and had come to the shore defeated, hungry, tired, discouraged,

and empty handed with only more work to be done. We had to clean up the nets to prepare for another night on the water, a night when there would hopefully be fish to be caught. Those nets were made of linen, strips of cloth, and had to be washed each day so that they would remain strong, and so we were on the shore with the nets spread out cleaning our nets.

Jesus came to the shore that morning followed by a large crowd. He seemed to be having some trouble with this crowd as they wanted to be close to him and were pressing him almost into the water. I remember him getting into my boat and asking me to put out into the shallows so he could teach. I was happy to see him again and was more than willing to let him teach this crowd from the safety of my boat. Jesus got in the boat and I moved out into the shallow water. We continued to work the nets while Jesus taught the crowds. Like all of the other times that I had been with Jesus when he taught, once he sat down and started teaching, the crowd got quiet and listened to his words. He spoke with such authority, his words drawing people in, drawing all of us into something new. They were words that touched one's heart, that moved one's spirit. His presence made the toil of cleaning the nets so much easier. I listened to him as I worked.

By the time Jesus finished teaching, the sun was high in the sky, the nets were dry and pulled into the boat ready for another night of fishing, and we were ready to go to our homes and rest. Jesus turned to me, and I thought he would ask me to move the boat back to shore so that he could be with some of the people who were waiting there for him. But that was not what he said, instead he told me, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." His request was so out of place. I had not known Jesus long at that point and was trying to listen to him as we had listened to John's teaching before we started following Jesus. I was trying to learn how to be a better person, one more focused on God and doing the things of God as Jesus taught. I only knew then that Jesus was a carpenter's son, and as such, I didn't think he knew a lot about fishing. For us, it had been a long night out on the lake and we, the fishermen, were exhausted and ready to go to our homes to sleep, to get something to eat, and to rest up for another night. We had fished all of the best places for fish and there was nothing in this part of the lake to catch. Yet, Jesus, the carpenter's son, had just told me the fisherman when to go and fish, to put out into the deep water, and let down the nets. And not just one net, but all of our nets as if there would be a lot of fish to be caught, fish that I, the experienced fisherman, knew, even if they were there, would see our nets and avoid them. I told Jesus that we had fished all night and caught nothing, but he had not really asked, but had told me to go and fish. I decided that I would

obey this teacher I was trying to follow, so I told him, “Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets,” and we cast off and pulled the oars to take the boat off the shore and out into the deeper water. James and John were in the other boat looking and smiling at us as we headed out. They had heard Jesus tell us it was time to fish in the heat of the day when no fisherman worked on the water, and they would wait for us to come back so they could witness the catch we would not have. John was always good with finding words to make the moment special, and he would have plenty of time to think up something to say when our boat returned empty.

I had some time to think about what I was doing, obeying Jesus, as we rowed out to the deep water. I had agreed to try to follow this man who taught the Word of God with such power, but this was an exercise in futility. Everything I had learned in my years on the water told me to turn back, that there would be no catch in the light of day. On top of that, there were no fish. Our long night of work testified to that, but this would not take long and the master had told me to go and fish. I decided that I would get to the deep water, let down the nets, all of the nets, and then pull them up to make the point that I had obeyed. Then we would row the empty boat back to shore and James and John would smile knowingly and John would share something about fishing in the daytime as we returned from wasting time. They would wait on the shore pretending to work on their boat so they could ask how the fishing went. They would hang around to get a laugh at my expense. Yet I had agreed to follow Jesus and to try to obey him when he asked me to do something, so I headed out into the deep water. Maybe this carpenter’s son would learn something about fishing from those who knew more, so we rowed.

We got out far enough to where the water deepened, seen in its dark green color, and I let down all the nets. I wanted to let only one down, but Jesus had said all of them, so into the water they went, down into the deep. I started pulling them back up as we had done all night and they would not move. I pulled harder and still they did not move. There was nothing in this part of the lake for them to hang on that I remembered, and I had not let them down to the bottom, so what was keeping them from coming up? Andrew saw my struggle and came and helped and when we still could not pull them up, the others in the boat joined us and slowly the nets came up. When they got close to the surface, we could see they were full of fish. Full of fish, so full that the nets were beginning to break! We started working frantically to get the fish out of the nets and into the boat before the nets gave way. I have never seen so many fish in the nets! Our boat would not hold them. We started motioning for James and John to come to help us. At first, they just waved

back, thinking we were trying to play a joke on them and get them to row out as well, but we kept signaling for them to come, and finally they came to see what was happening. Our boat was full to the point it might sink, and we started filling their boat from our nets as well, and still there were more fish in the nets! We filled the second boat to the point it was sinking as well. I have never seen so many fish! It was a fortune in fish. It was a moment those working on the water dream of as they labor at the nets. Everyone was excited, talking, laughing, and filled with joy at the catch. Our tiredness was gone, we had fish! I looked at the filled boats and the sun shining down on all of those fish. fish that could see the nets and avoid them yet were still caught, not a few, but nets full. I realized that only God could have done such an extravagant, impossible thing, and then I remembered that it was at Jesus' command that I had let down the nets. I was in the presence of one who could bring fish into the nets when none should come. And he had brought not a few, but an extravagant, beyond imagination, number of fish. Jesus was in the front of the boat watching us and, in that moment, I realized that he must be an agent of God. I was in the presence of an agent of God! I, a sinful man, was in God's presence, and like those events from the Scriptures where sinful people are in God's presence and die, I am in God's presence and I thought I was going to die. I worked my way past the fish to where Jesus was standing and fell down in front of him and begged him "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

It got quiet out there on the water. They all recognized what I had realized, that this catch was not possible unless God's hand was present. Everyone in both boats was amazed, shocked, and wondering what had happened to bring such a catch and what was going to happen to us. James and John in the other boat were looking across this great catch of fish at Jesus. Neither was sure what to do. And then Jesus broke the silence saying to us, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." We had no idea what that meant, to catch people. I got up, trusting Jesus' words to not be afraid, and we started carefully working the boats back to shore and then ran them aground so the boats could not sink under the weight of such a catch. Jesus got out of my boat without another word and started walking down the shore, going somewhere. I stood in the back of the boat and looked at all of the fish we had caught, a fortune, more fish than I dreamed possible to catch. More fish than we had caught in many years of fishing. We were rich, our debts would be paid off, we could buy another boat, new nets, new homes, we were secure as a result of this extravagant catch. And then across the pile of fish my eyes found

Jesus walking away going down the shore. God's agent was walking away, not a carpenter's son who knew nothing about fishing but one from God. This man, who had told us we would be catching people from now on and to have no fear, was leaving us and going out into his mission. I stood there with the steering oar in my hand, looked at the great catch of fish and remembered Jesus' words to not be afraid, that from now on we would be catching people. I got out of my boat, walked up to the shore, and turned and started following Jesus, leaving the boat, nets, fish and everything on the shore to follow Jesus. I had not gone far when I realized I was not alone as I walked after Jesus. The others were following Jesus as well. We had no idea where we were going or what it would mean to follow Jesus, but we answered his call to be those who would catch people and kept walking with him.

Our walk with Jesus that began that day continues to this day. I can't remember that catch without recalling another greater catch. We had followed Jesus, listening, watching, and learning all the way to the cross and then watched as he died. We hid in the upper room, and Jesus' promise that we would catch people seemed to be over. Jesus had drawn great crowds but now just a few of us remained together wondering what would happen to this promise of catching people. The women had found the empty tomb that morning and I ran to see it with John, but Jesus was not there. And that evening, suddenly Jesus was among us and fear of death at the hands of the Jews changed again to fear of being in the presence of God, and Jesus spoke, telling us to not be frightened but to wait for power from on high. We waited and at Pentecost the Holy Spirit came and I stood up with the others and started speaking the Word of God that Jesus had given us, and people began to come into the kingdom of God through belief in Jesus. Thousands of people gave their lives to Jesus that day, they believed in him, and they also began to follow Jesus as we told them about him. And on that day, we began to catch people, not in nets of linen but with Jesus working through us filled with the Spirit as we shared the Word of God that he had given us. We began to catch people in the nets of loving relationships. On that day I remembered the big catch of fish, fish that were caught for death to be fileted and consumed, and on this day, I saw people being caught for life in the kingdom of God. When we stepped into Jesus' promise of catching people, we had no idea what he was asking, but at Pentecost we began to catch people in the secure nets of love, nets that do not break and are never filled. We were catching people not to death, but to eternal life through Jesus.

That day of fishing was the greatest catch of fish I can remember, but it is nothing compared to catching a single person and bringing him or her into a relationship with Jesus. Jesus' words came true as they always do, and we begin to catch people. And it grew and grew and grew and continues to grow today. Wherever people will obey Jesus, move out into the deep waters of the world, and let down their nets of loving relationships, allowing Christ in them to work through them, lives are transformed and the true catch, the greatest catch, a catch of people, continues. Jesus didn't say that day in the boat that for a while we will be catching people. He said that from now on you will be catching people. He didn't name us as those who would catch people and it would end. He said you, all who will follow him, obey him, have Jesus within them, and will let down the nets of loving relationships into the deep water of the world, will continue to catch people. The greatest catch continues as long as people follow Jesus. This is the greatest catch I have ever seen and it grows and grows beyond anything I could imagine as others join Jesus and head out into the world to catch people.

*Pray with me: Jesus, we surrender all and obediently follow you this day into the deep water of the world to be those who humbly obey your word, obey your commands, and go out into the world to let down the nets of love you have placed in us that we might join you to catch those who think they see, but who are blind. Take away our fear, Lord, so that we follow you, love others as you love us, and catch people. Amen.*