

The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany, Year C, Proper 1, 2022
1 Corinthians 14.1-11, Luke 5.1-11, Psalm 19

Lucille's grandfather and her grandfather's brother were fishermen on the Eastern Shore of Nova Scotia. Each owned their boat. And day by day, week by week, they would go fishing braving the North Atlantic beyond the shelter of the islands. Lucille recalls how she knew when her grandfather and his brother were returning from a day's work long before she actually caught sight of them. The sign was seagulls circling behind the island that lies in front of the bay where they lived. These two men worked as a team. They supported each other. They helped each another. Together they braved the dangers of the ocean. Two families fishing together. It reminds me of today's gospel with its two boats.

Luke paints a picture that invites us to visualise today's Gospel for ourselves. A lake, the lakeshore, two boats, fishermen cleaning their nets. People at work. It is a weekday. We paint into that picture people pressing Jesus to hear God's word. Jesus seeing the empty boats steps into one of them and asks Peter to push out from the shore. This detail is peculiar, but there are some bays around Lake Gennesaret coupled with the surrounding hills sloping down to the lakeshore creating what we can think of as a natural arena in the shape of horseshoe. It has been suggested and this seems plausible Jesus wasn't only using the geographical formation and a boat as a platform, but also the wind at his back to help carry his voice. The details of the picture painted are in many aspects taken from everyday life, landscape and even weather.

I am sure most of us would love to hear Jesus for ourselves, as the people who gathered that day at Lake Gennesaret, but the focus in this Lukan Gospel episode is not the teaching, but on the haul of fish, the reaction to the haul of fish and its outcome. We learn that Peter, James and John have already been fishing all night on the lake having caught nothing. Jesus tells them to push out and fish once more. A child would say, But do we have to? Peter proceeds to say, "Master, ... Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

Let's pause for a moment. Peter addresses Jesus first as Master, which is the traditional English translation. The word might be better understood, so explains Wikipedia, as belonging to a set of Greek words meaning 'visitor' or 'divine visitation' (*episkope*), 'letter of instruction' (*epistole*), as well as 'guardian' or 'caretaker' (*episkopos*). The etymology of the Greek master (*epistata*) leads me to think of Jesus as God's letter to us. A letter we need to open and read carefully time and time again. Letters come at expected times like Christmas, Easter, birthdays and at the death of a loved one and at unexpected times breaking in with good and not such good news. Jesus is God's letter to each one of us. Lucille and I enjoyed a period of letter writing

when we were separated for a year prior to marrying. It was tough being separated. Each of us would wait for that letter. Read it numerous times longing to know more and when it didn't come ... Before my mother's passing last year both Lucille and I on separate occasions read my father's letters to my mother from their year of separation in 1954. Jesus is God's letter to us. Luke is often regarded as the first Christian artist/painter. So if Jesus is God's letter to us, us being humanity, then it is Luke the Evangelist who paints a picture of Jesus for us.

At Cana in Galilee Mary says to the chief steward, do whatever he Jesus tells you and so the wine amphora are filled with water that is turned into wine. In today's Gospel Jesus directs Peter to put out his boat and cast the nets. Although Peter and his companions have worked all night, although there was no catch he does as instructed. He does as Jesus directs and is surprisingly rewarded, so much so that he must call on his companions to help him with the haul, who come willingly to his aid. So many fish are caught that the boats are in danger of sinking. The sign is clear. It is a sign of abundance. This sign joins hands with the sign at Cana in Galilee it too being a sign of abundance. Fish and wine, fish and bread are staples of life. God provides. In all of this let us not lose sight of Peter's ultimate willingness to comply. His willingness to please. In spiritual terms for our journey Peter's example can serve as an example of our readiness to serve in contrast to our resistance, our knowing better, our lethargy while learning to take our lead from God... as discovered in prayer, in worship, in the Bible, in Christian community, through our consciences, our attentiveness to today and through the Holy Spirit working in us.

Even now I suspect that for most Simon Peter's reaction and that of the sons of Zebedee to the catch of the fish is surprising. What do we make of it? First let us make sure to see Peter falling down on his knees before Jesus. I am reminded of the Biblical passages like, "O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!" (Psalm 95.6) Peter goes on to address Jesus as Lord, Kyrie. We have moved from Master to Lord. The sign, the catch of fish brings recognition. And what does the recognition consist of? What is the insight? What is the confession? Peter recognises and says before Jesus and all those gathered not just the other fisherman, but also the crowds, he says simply, I am a human being, who is full of sin, but before articulating who he is before Jesus he wants to push Jesus away, saying, "Go away from me!"

There are many little devices that people use to push Jesus away today. One of the most obvious ones is when people use Jesus' name in vain. Disrespectfully. Jesus has no hold over me! I am always startled when people uses Jesus' and God's name in vain, even people who should know better. Another is to belittle Jesus and what he means for you and me and billions of other people the world over to the point of persecution. This too is disrespectful. It might be a friend, a colleague, a family

member or members who show disrespect for God and what you hold dear faith in God. We often collude in this. When people push Jesus away they often push him away so that he can't get under their skin. Afraid, if they let him in, of what is then required of them. To belittle Jesus is to push him away. Peter too is wanting to push Jesus away, but there is no disregard of his person. Is it because Jesus in some way is other? holy? God? Lord?

Luke explains that the catch of fish causes amazement amongst all who are gathered at the lakeshore. In the same way the steward at the wedding feast at Cana was amazed. "But you have kept the good wine until now." It is Jesus who diagnoses that Peter's reaction and the reaction of the others has caused fear to manifest itself. The catch of fish is a cause for fear. Are we in the presence of God? We are reminded of Isaiah, who says of himself, "And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!'" (Isaiah 6.5)

Addressing Peter and the other fishermen Jesus says, "Do not be afraid, I will make you fish for people!" It isn't the call to follow that we are accustomed to from the other accounts of the calling of the first disciples. Peter recognises what he is before Jesus. Human and sinful. Here Jesus' pronouncement is first and foremost a call not to be afraid. That is worth repeating. It is first and foremost a call not to be afraid. Let it sink in. Peter's encounter and that of his companions is to overcome fear. What would that mean for you, us, me, Christ Church, if we overcame the fear that steals in our hearts and is debilitating?

If the catch of fish causes amazement, so surely must also the reaction of Peter, James and John, the sons of Zebedee and even more so. Luke sums up, "When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him." We don't at this point hear Jesus calling on them to follow, but the reaction of these men is to do just that. They follow by leaving everything. Jesus has become their guiding star. They will follow him to Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets. They will follow him to Calvary, and there they will be overwhelmed – we note their sudden absence in Mark's account: "There were ... women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem." Where are the men to be found? Did fear get the upper hand...

There are at least three things we should consider on hearing this Gospel embedded as it is in a landscape reminding us of another catch of fish at Lake Gennesaret to be found amongst the resurrection appearances. One is the sign given being the catch of the fish with Peter's reaction. Two, Jesus' response to Peter's reaction. Three, why

would these men get up unafraid and follow by leaving everything behind with the most succinct of job descriptions entailing an extensive retraining programme? No longer will your occupation be to catch fish, but rather under my direction you will catch men and women for the Kingdom of God.

This Gospel speaks to us of abundance by a movement from a failed fishing expedition to a catch of fish that fills two boats. It tells us what can be accomplished in Jesus' name under His direction. It tells of a monumental turnaround. Peter wanting to push Jesus away, only for him to draw close by overcoming fear and following by leaving everything behind. The turnaround occurs when Peter acknowledges who he is before Jesus: human, full of sin. Jesus answers by telling him not to be afraid and that there is a new purpose for his life. We see Peter first addressing Jesus as Master and then as Lord. There are layers and layers. Choose one of these layers and make it your spiritual discipline for the week.

Master and Lord, hinder us from pushing you away. Direct us that we may see ourselves as Peter saw himself, as he fell down before you on his knees as human and sinful. Speak to us, as you spoke to Peter, 'Do not be afraid.' Invite us anew to be fisher of people in your service by helping us to see what hinders us from following you and what we must leave behind in our lives, in our church, at work and at play to be honestly in your service. **Amen.**