

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany

CATCHING AND BEING CAUGHT

Luke 5:1-11

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany (Proper 11)

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

Luke 5:1 Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, 2he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 3He 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. 4When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." 5Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." 6When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. 7So 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. 8But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" 9For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; 10and 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." 11When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

DIAGNOSIS: Living in Fear

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Daily Life Under the Law*

Food is necessary for life; without it we die. In seafood based economies, those who can fish are held in high esteem (as is evident in the “Survivor” series). Still, in a world of few grocery stores and no credit cards, where seafood is highly perishable and survival hangs by a thread (or net), fishermen are always only days away from hunger, or worse. One is motivated by having to make a catch each day. So every day is lived under a threat. Every day is lived in reliance upon others. Every day is lived under certain responsibilities, and the fear of failure. Every day is lived “under the law.” As it was then, so it is still.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Self Reliance*

Simon, James, and John “worked all night long but caught nothing” (v. 5). They had done their own “work” with dismal results. They had exhausted their own means in the game of life. They were not providing for themselves let alone their families. They had done their best, even their best together, but their best was not good enough. As it was then, so it is still.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Overflowing Sin*

Upon their return from fishing, the would-be fishermen heard Jesus proclaim “the word of God” (v. 1), the “good news of the kingdom of God” (4:43). What a contrast that must have been! One can’t eat promises! If they were not bemused by the irony, perhaps they had begun to suspect that they themselves were in dire need for the kingdom of God, not to provide fish but to reconcile them to God. Indeed so! After Jesus had filled their nets to overflowing, Simon “fell down” in fear and exclaimed, “I am a sinful man” (v. 8). Sin had overflowed. As it was then, so it is still.

PROGNOSIS: Living in Faith

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Overflowing Mercy*
Jesus' overflowing catch of fish was prelude to an overflowing act of mercy (projected back onto the story at hand) that bears the truth of Jesus' promise to Simon, "Do not be afraid" (v. 10). That mercy is accomplished in Jesus' crucifixion, a death that reconciles sinners with God, as voiced by Jesus on the cross, "Father, forgive them" (23:34; see also 24:44-49). As it was then, so it is still.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Relying on Christ*

So great a mercy, like a great catch of fish, is catching. It "catches" all who hear it and believe it, as did Simon, James, and John. The gospel is no longer the kingdom promised but the kingdom fulfilled. Relying on such mercy means no longer relying on oneself for life's sufficiency, but on Christ who is all sufficient. Therefore the disciples "left everything and followed him" (v. 11). As it was then, so it is still.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Daily Life Under the Gospel*

Unlike previous days, now everyday is lived "under the gospel." Like the apostles before us, we too have been caught in the gospel's "net." In Christ we are more than survivors (Rom. 8:37). Everyday is lived under a promise of mercy by relying on Christ instead of ourselves. Failure is no longer an option. From now on, by proclaiming the gospel as Jesus did, we are "catchers of people" (v. 10). Nor are we afraid of a great catch! We shall not sink under the load, for Christ has borne it all and he is with us still (read "Acts of the Apostles"). As it was then, so it is still.