

The Great Catch of Fish – Luke 5:1-11

When we leave behind the familiar, what will we discover?

That's the question that comes to my mind as this week's reading draws to a close. When we leave behind the familiar, what will we discover?

For Peter and Andrew, James and John, fishing was familiar. Probably a luckless night of fishing wasn't really unfamiliar either. The fishermen knew when it was time to call it a night.

Under the hot daytime sun, the fish would only become harder to catch. There was no reason to think throwing the nets in one more time would succeed when it had already failed who knows how many times.

They pull their boats to the shore and begin cleaning the nets to be ready for the next night.

Jesus was there on the shore. Jesus seemed to draw a crowd wherever he went. Peter must have had a little bit of familiarity with Jesus. But he doesn't yet really have a grasp on who Jesus is.

Jesus enlists Peter's help to get one of the boats out on the water so he can use it as a floating pulpit and reach more of the crowd.

Finished with his teaching, Jesus looks at Peter and says try one more time. Go out to the deep water, throw out the nets and try again.

We don't know what made Peter, and probably his brother and partner Andrew, do what Jesus suggested. They likely know more about fishing than Jesus and thought this was going to be an exercise in futility.

Only it wasn't. The nets were so full this time they started tearing. Excited, Peter called for James and John to come help. The load of fish began to pull both boats lower into the water.

That's when it happens. That's when Peter knows this is no ordinary person. And his response is the typical Jewish response to being in the presence of God – an awestruck fear. Fear because he knows he has come face to face with God...and is unworthy.

Jesus pays no attention to Peter's profession of sinfulness...he just says come, follow me. Worthiness and competence are virtually never the basis for God's call.

The fishermen leave their nets and their boats, and they follow. They leave behind the familiar. They leave behind their livelihoods. They set out on a journey into the unknown.

They have no idea what this fishing for people will look like or how it will go. But they know that in the deep waters of the lake of Genesaret, Jesus turned nothing into a net breaking catch.

They're willing to take the risk to leave behind the familiar. If Jesus could turn the emptiness of their fishing nets into that kind of catch, what could he do for people's lives? What could he do for a people struggling under the weight of oppression? And Peter must have figured, if Jesus can do that with those empty nets, maybe he could do something with these ordinary, and maybe even unworthy fishermen.

As we listen to the story this morning, what seems empty in our lives? What are the disappointments and failures? What are the fears and worries?

What will Jesus do to heal and fill empty hearts?

What will Jesus do for the emptiness and pain of an almost year long pandemic?

I think there are a lot of people in the church world right now who worry that the church itself could become like those empty nets.

Church membership and engagement had been falling for years even before the pandemic.

And although some churches have actually experienced growth through the pandemic through their online outreach, others have seen declining attendance, both virtually and in person.

Church leaders worry people won't come back.

Our attendance has remained quite steady. We have been able to maintain some sense of community and connection through Zoom and the US postal service

But none of it really feels quite right. It doesn't have that comfortable, familiar feeling of how we've always done things.

Probably for most of us, staring at a screen with people in boxes isn't how we want it to be...and for some it probably feels downright empty...empty like those fishing nets.

But in our story today, Jesus entered into that emptiness...and turned it around into abundance. Jesus took those empty nets and filled them to a fullness those fishermen could never have imagined.

And then, Jesus called an ordinary fisherman...one who didn't even feel worthy to stand in Jesus' presence...into an extraordinary life. Peter, the rock.

If Jesus could do all that, what new thing is he calling us into? And what will we need to leave behind?

Jesus is still calling his disciples to fish for people. Like those Galilean fishermen, Jesus calls us to leave the familiar behind.

So what familiar things will we be called to leave behind? And what will our call to cast our nets look like? And when we leave the familiar behind, what new things will we discover?

The pandemic has already forced us out of the familiar. And yes, we're all longing to get some of that familiar back.

But as we transition back to something that seems more normal, I think this should also be a time of discernment. What of the familiar might we be called to leave behind? And what new adventures might we be called into?

I think one of the things in the Church...and I'm talking big C church, not specifically just ours...is a more organic sense of ministry....ideas for ministry that come from folks in the congregation.

For a long time the temptation in the church is to let the pastor and in a bigger church, other paid staff figure out how the church will serve in its community. That would be something best left behind.

We've actually had a couple of cool things that arose in just that way.

The idea for Bethlehem's Little Free Pantry came from Tonya noticing a post about Lincoln's Little Free Pantries.

And the Otto family challenge raised \$1500 for the Ashland Food Pantry.

So if you have an idea, run with it! Feel free to talk to me about what support your idea needs from the church.

Another thing that needs to be left behind is our fear of speaking out on issues of justice and compassion. In a world where everything has become so deeply political and polarized, we the

church can still proclaim the Jesus who said we should feed the hungry, clothe the naked, set the oppressed free, and welcome the stranger.

We can disagree on how that all gets done, but we can't say it's not what Jesus wants us to do. When we're able, we'll resume our faith and current events discussions and talk about some ways the church might be called to wade in.

Of course another thing we've been forced to leave behind is any reluctance to explore new technologies and how they might help us reach more people with Christ's love. I won't be too sad to leave Zoom worship behind. But Zoom and YouTube Live and Facebook Live will likely be a part of our toolbox forever. And I for one will likely have less anxiety about trying new technology if it appears to help us reach more people.

And the last thing we need to leave behind is our fear of talking about our faith. Faith, and particularly the Christian faith, has gotten lots of attention over the last several years – and a lot of it is not good.

We are called to proclaim the real Jesus, the one who called the unworthy...the one who shared meals with outcasts and sinners...the one who turns nothing into abundance and brings life out of death...the one who gave his life for people who didn't deserve it.

Too often the Jesus in the news and on social media is a hateful one who is not even recognizable as the Jesus of the Bible.

We may doubt our ability to be who Jesus calls us to be. Peter clearly did. But remember, we are called by the one who turned nothing into nets filled to the breaking point...the one who transformed an unlikely bunch of fishermen into apostles.

As we walk into the church's future, we will be called to leave some things behind. But when we leave the familiar behind, what new things will we discover?

