

“God works in surprising ways – a fishing lesson” – Pastor Paul Matheson

1 Cor. 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11 (February 6, 2022)

Let me say, right at the start, that I’m not much of a fisherman. And to demonstrate that, I’ll tell you a story about one of my more memorable excursions.

Our family was on vacation, in B.C., on Haida Gwaii. It’s a beautiful place. And one of the things you can do there, we learned, is go crabbing. The local hardware store will sell you a license and outfit you with a net and hip waders. Wouldn’t it be fun to try?

There were some rules: Don’t take any crabs under a certain size, and no females. We were given a quick lesson in crab anatomy.

Then out we went, walking from the beach into the frigid waters of the Pacific.

The wind was up, the waves were high, the water was turbid and cold. After an hour with no luck, the rest of the family decided they’d had enough.

But not me! I was determined to catch *something*. Thoughts of a fresh-boiled crab dinner by the campfire, and the stories we’d tell, motivated me to keep going.

I did this for some time. Until my legs went numb from the cold and wet, and my lips turned blue, and I could barely move. “Come in, we want to go back,” my family shouted.

“I’ll show them,” I said to myself! But all I had to show, after hours of dogged determination was an *empty* net. So *that* became our story. It was not the one I was hoping for.



Gisele Bauche is a Saskatchewan artist. She is also a person of deep Christian faith. Her art adorns the walls of churches, religious institutions and private homes.

Lindsay and I are privileged to have a copy of this particular painting hanging in our home – a depiction of the scene from today’s Gospel reading.

It’s a beautiful image. But it’s also one that I have found *troubling*. Look at all those fish being drawn into the boat! And yet, well, where are the fish in *my* boat?



We’re continuing our series of sermons that focus on the surprising work of God. We’ve seen Jesus turn water into wine. We’ve heard him teaching in the synagogue. We’ve seen him thrown out of the synagogue.

Today’s story begins with him teaching by the lake of Gennesaret. Jesus drew a large number of listeners, who were pressing in upon him. When he saw two boats sitting on the beach, he got into one, and asked the owner to put out from shore.

From there, Jesus continued his teaching. And when he finished, he instructed Simon: “Now put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

Simon was skeptical. “Master, we’ve worked all night and haven’t caught a thing.” It had indeed been a long night. The

boat was empty. The nets were mended and stored away. Tired and worn out, Simon was ready to call it quits.

“There’s no fish here, Lord. Nothing to be caught. There’s no point in carrying on. “Yet,” he said, with a sigh ... “if you say so.”

He did it, perhaps to humour Jesus, who’s obviously a land-lubber and doesn’t have a *clue* when it comes to fishing.

Or *does* he?



By Gisele Bauche, used with permission.

“If you say so ... If you’re sure that’s what you want to do ... then I guess we can do it.”

And so he grudgingly complied. And groaned as his sore muscles cast the nets back over the gunnels. Down they went, into the deep.



And do you know what happened next? Well, we are talking about *surprises*, aren’t we?

The nets ensnared a shoal of fish! There were so many of them that they began to strain.

Simon’s eyes grew large. First with amazement, then with fear. What to do? How to save the nets? How to get these fish aboard?

In near panic, he signaled to his partners: “Come and help us!” Even with two boats, they could barely take them in. The water began to lap over the sides and threatened to sink them.

It was such an extraordinary moment. Here were fish enough to make poor Simon a rich man. Him and James and John – the lot of them.



But at that very moment something snapped. And Simon fell down at Jesus’ knees, blubbing like a little child. “Go away from me Lord,” he said, looking down at the floundering mass of fish. “For I am a sinful man.”

Peter had just realized the larger implications of what has taken place. He saw that this enormous catch was not the result of *his* fishing prowess. It was the result of the man who instructed him.



I want you to have another look at Gisele’s painting. Notice the relative size of the characters. See the disciples hauling in their nets? Now see Jesus towering above them, larger than life, with outspread arms.

Of course this is a theological statement more than anything. Jesus towers above the rest of us in knowledge, wisdom, power and might.



I think for some time I’ve been looking at this painting *incorrectly*. I’ve been attracted by the catch of fish – the sheer number of them, and wondering why *I* haven’t been able to replicate that miracle in my life. Where are all the fish?

But the miracle, I think, points *beyond* the fish! It points to *Jesus*. Which is why we’re reading this passage in the Epiphany season. Because it shows us things we need to know, and maybe haven’t fully realized – about who this Jesus is.

It’s not about the fish. For goodness sake, Peter and James and John will leave the fish. Here they are with the catch of a lifetime, a veritable fortune. And “when they brought their boats to shore, they left everything,” scripture tells us.

As for *us*, I wonder, what have we left to follow Jesus? Or is the lure of the big catch too attractive for us to let them go?



I learned early on that ministry in the church is not a *numbers* game. Though it is often tempting to think of it that way: The biggest congregation. The largest children’s program. The most significant impact in the community ... measured how, exactly? By what metrics do we measure the kingdom of God?

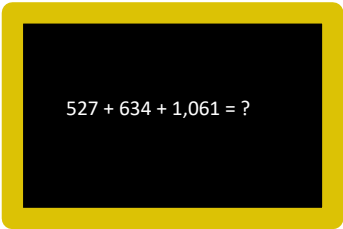
And please hear this: I’m not dismissing those things. I’m just saying it’s the wrong *focus*. In the time and place we live (which is 21st century North America) those things are hard to come by, for a whole variety of reasons.

But the presence of *Christ* is not hard to come by. And the abundance Jesus gives to his disciples is amazing!

When I think of my *own* life, for example, I am filled with gratitude for opportunities I’ve been given to serve God and neighbour; for a sense of connection, companionship and community that I have found in the presence of God’s people; for love, forgiveness, strength for each day. Hope for an even better day! These are wondrous gifts that Jesus shares with us.



Christ pours out grace that is overflowing. Grace that takes us as we are, no questions asked.



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Please note that both Peter and Paul, possibly the two greatest apostles of the church, felt *unworthy* of their calling. “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” said Peter.

And in our reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul calls himself “the *least* of the apostles,” unfit for service because of his former life. “But by the *grace* of God, I am what I am ...”

You see? So much abundance! So much to be grateful for!

I’d like to pause for a moment, and ask you to consider the gifts God has given *you*. What are they? What abundance has Christ poured out upon your life? Take a moment and name those gifts quietly to yourself.



And now listen, here’s something else to consider: The new life, the kingdom promised by Jesus, is not yet complete. So if there are days and nights with no great catch of fish, maybe that’s to be expected. Like Peter, who fished through the night with nothing to show for it.

We *all* have days and nights – maybe months and years – when we go through the motions faithfully. We come to church. We pray. We try to love and serve our neighbour. We try to be the kind of disciples that Jesus wants.

And maybe for all that time there *is* no great catch.

But the kingdom of God is an eschatological *hope*, as well as a present day reality. It’s still in the future. There’s always more to come!



Jesus is the giver of abundance. If there are nets to be filled and drawn from the sea, then it is *he* who will make it happen, not us.

Yes, of course, we have to do our part. When Jesus gives instructions we must listen very carefully. Are you listening? Are you ready to follow his command?

We should never think that just because we’ve been fishing all these years, now we have it down pat. Actually, we have *much* to learn. And Jesus may give us some rather surprising instructions. And when he does, we had better be obedient.

“Drop your nets now,” he says. But Lord we’ve been out all night. “Put them in where the water is deep,” he says. But Lord, we know there aren’t any fish.

Why are we so resistant? Why is it so easy to make excuses?



The *big* surprise in this story is this – and perhaps it will come to you as an epiphany:

You are not the *only* person in the boat. And certainly not *biggest* person in the boat. (Did you think you were?) You’re not. Neither am I. Not any of us.

We are not. *Jesus* is! Just like in Gisele’s painting.

And I take that as very Good News – Gospel even! There’s someone in the boat that’s *bigger* than me. One who knows far more than me. One who is much stronger than me. Wiser than me. One who will always be faithful, even when I am not. One who will be gracious and keep on loving me, no matter what.

And I hope that surprising discovery puts you at ease. That it will lighten your burden and fill you with joy – the joy that comes from knowing the Lord is with us, feeling his presence by our side, listening for his voice, following his commands.

One day –who knows when? –he will bless us with such surprising abundance that we will fall at his knees, like Peter, confessing our unworthiness and brimming with gratitude and praise. Then we will be in his presence like we never have before.



And in the mean time, we follow. Faithfully fishing, casting our nets, drawing them in. Willing to be surprised at the times and places where Jesus calls us. “Drop them *now*,” he says. “Drop them *here*.”

This week, as you go to your home, remember your calling. Most of all, remember who it is that calls you. And be grateful for all the abundance Jesus brings. Amen.