

Epiphany 5 (C)

Lk 5.1-11

There's something quite creative going on in today's gospel lesson: Luke does some very interesting things with this story in order to make the point he wants to make. It looks like what Luke has done is to combine into a single story what appear in the other gospels as two separate stories. The reason Luke does this has everything to do with what he wants to say about discipleship. As we continue our observance of the season of Epiphany, this story tells us that when the glory of God is manifest in the world the best response we can offer is to follow wherever it leads.

In order to get a better sense of how exactly Luke makes this point and to get a better sense of what this story might have to say to us, we need to look at the particular way Luke uses this story in his account of the life of Jesus.

I mentioned that it seems Luke has combined two separate stories into a single story: one of those stories has to do with the calling of the first disciples (and especially the calling of Simon Peter), and the other of those stories has to do with this seemingly miraculous catch of fish. So let's look at each of those, and then look at how Luke combines them; then we'll be ready to ask what this story has to say to us.

The first story Luke draws on has to do with the calling of the first disciples, and especially the calling of Simon Peter. All four gospels have some version of this story, but they all tell it in rather different ways. John's account is the most unique: the first four disciples are not Simon, Andrew, James, and John, but rather Simon, Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael, and there's no mention of boats or fishing for people or any of that.

Matthew and Mark are closer to Luke: we see Jesus calling not only Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, but also James and John, the sons of Zebedee. "Follow me," Jesus says, "and I will make you fish for people." That sounds familiar.

But there are some differences as well, seemingly insignificant details that reveal hidden depths when we look at them closely. For example, this is not the first time in Luke's gospel that Simon Peter is mentioned. In Matthew and in Mark—and in John, for that matter—we first meet Simon Peter when Jesus calls him to be a disciple.

But in Luke, Simon Peter has already been around for a little while; he's been hanging out on the edges of Luke's narrative, watching Jesus and trying to figure out who he is. He was in the synagogue at Capernaum when Jesus delivered a man with an unclean spirit. Excited by what he sees in the synagogue, he invites Jesus to his house, where Jesus heals his mother-in-law. Pretty soon, crowds of people are showing up at Simon Peter's house, asking to be healed.

Simon Peter's watching all of this, trying to take it all in and figure out what it all means. So by the time we get to the story in today's gospel, Simon Peter's already convinced Jesus is someone special. When Jesus tells him to put out into deep water and let down his nets just one more

time, Simon obeys even though he doesn't understand why Jesus asks him to do this.

And when Simon Peter sees what happens, it's all too much for him. This is the last straw: people healed of their sickness, people delivered from the bondage of spiritual oppression, crowds of people following Jesus around hanging on his every word, and now *this*? Simon Peter is overwhelmed. He goes from calling Jesus "master" to calling him "lord." He recognizes he's not just in the presence of some charismatic teacher, he's in the presence of someone unlike anyone else he's ever met. He's so overcome he considers himself not worthy even to be in the same room as Jesus.

What Luke gives us in his account of the calling of Simon Peter is a paradigmatic case study in how to become a disciple. Matthew, Mark, and John all give us accounts of the calling of Simon Peter in which his decision to follow Jesus comes out of nowhere; Jesus shows up, and Simon Peter is all in, no questions asked.

Luke, on the other hand, provides an account that serves as a model for other would-be disciples. If you want to be a disciple of Jesus, Luke tells us, do what Simon Peter does: pay close attention to the signs, listen to what Jesus says, observe what he does, do what he tells you to do. And when you do all of that, you'll find yourself right where Simon Peter found himself, following Jesus as master and lord.

I mentioned earlier that Luke combines two different stories into a single story: the first of these is the calling of Simon Peter, and now it's time to look at the second. The second story has to do with this remarkable catch of fish.

Luke is not the only gospel to relate this story; John has a version of it as well. What's interesting about the story of the miraculous catch is that Luke and John put it in very different places in their narratives, but they both use it to make a similar point.

And we've got Luke's account today, so I'm going to focus on that one. But you may want to go home and pull out your Bible and take a look at the very last chapter of John—chapter twenty-one—and then compare that version with today's gospel.

But for now, what does Luke do with this story? Luke uses this story to make a particular point about the *experience* of discipleship, namely, the kind of transformation it effects in a person's life. We see this in two details of the story. The first detail has to do with the location where the story is set: near Gennesaret, down the coast from Capernaum where Simon Peter lived. The second detail has to do with the catch of fish Simon Peter and his companions manage to haul in—so many fish their nets were breaking, so many fish they needed two boats to hold them all and even then it wasn't enough; the boats, Luke tells us, "began to sink."

Now, how do these two detail point to transformation? Take a look at the very last line of the story: "When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him." They left everything: they left the fish, they left the boats, they didn't even bother to go home first.

There they are, miles from home, having brought nothing with them except what they'd need for work, and having just landed what was probably the biggest and most lucrative haul of their careers, and they just walked away. They get to shore and they ask Jesus, "Okay: where are we going?" Their lives had been turned upside down, and they were ready to follow Jesus wherever he was going to lead them. When faced with the choice between following Jesus or going back to their old lives, they found it was no choice at all.

There's one further dimension of this story we need to look at. All this talk of discipleship and transformation is well and good, but neither of those are the real point of the story. If we focus only on these two aspects of the story and think of them as the main point, we'll make the mistake of thinking that discipleship is chiefly about us and whatever feelings we associate with following Jesus.

But Luke's version of this story points us in a different direction. The real point of this story is found in the words Jesus speaks to Simon Peter: "Don't be afraid; from now on, you'll be catching people."

In other words, the transformation we experience as disciples of Jesus is for the sake of the world. The experience of discipleship means not just following Jesus, but following him so that we may join with him in the work he himself is doing. Simon Peter had heard Jesus teaching; he saw him interacting with the crowds. He had seen Jesus heal; he watched as Jesus delivered people from both physical and spiritual forms of debilitation. And he had heard Jesus say, "I'm not staying here, I'm moving on, because I have to share the good news with everyone. That's why I came." And now, Simon Peter hears Jesus telling him, "You're going to do this, too; you're going to help me save this world."

Luke makes a number of points about discipleship in this story. He shows us that following Jesus is a matter of paying attention to what Jesus is doing: notice the signs, listen to the words, observe the actions, do what he tells you to do. He shows us that discipleship results in transformation: it has a way of upending our lives and enabling us "leave everything" to follow our Lord and master. And he shows us that the point of discipleship is sharing in the work that Jesus himself is doing: proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for those who are oppressed. Go to wherever people haven't heard the news, and tell them that this is the year of the Lord's favor.

What does being a disciple look like in your life? What does it look like in our life as a community of faith? Both as individuals and as a community, we are called to follow Jesus. We are called to transformation, to "leave everything" and go wherever Christ leads us. And we are called to these things because God has invited us to take part in the work he is doing to redeem this world.

Faced with the challenge of being disciples, we may feel more than a little overwhelmed. We may be afraid of leaving everything, we may be anxious about not knowing where we're going and where Jesus might lead us, we may think the task is too big and our resources too limited.

But if we feel that way, we need to recognize that's exactly where Simon Peter found himself:

“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” And then we need to hear the voice of our lord and master: “Do not be afraid, for there is work to be done; from now on, I am with you, and I have chosen you to help me save this world.”

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