

Isaiah 6:1-8

Luke 5:1-11

February 10, 2019

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

A WHOLE MESS OF FISH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Many years ago, two brothers who were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee found something they had been hoping to find for a long time. One day when they were on the beach of the lake, they finally saw what they had been waiting for so long.

No, I'm not talking about Simon and Andrew or James and John on the shore of the Sea of Galilee in 30 A.D. Instead, these two brothers were Moshe and Yuval Lufan and the year was 1986 A.D. The brothers were part of a family that had fished the waters of the Sea of Galilee for generations. They lived in a town called Kibbutz Ginosar, which takes its name from the New Testament town of Gennesaret, which we heard about in Luke's story. Moshe and Yuval had always hoped to find an ancient fishing boat. When a severe drought caused the water level in the lake to drop, the brothers discovered such a boat buried in the mud and sand on the northwest side of Lake Gennesaret or the Sea of Galilee, where today's gospel story took place.

Although there is no evidence linking this boat to Jesus and his fishermen disciples, radiocarbon dating and items found in the boat (such as nails, a cooking pot, and a lamp) put the boat in the time frame of 50 BC to 50 AD. According to BassResource.com, if you're fishing with a buddy, a big, heavy 14 foot long, 4 foot wide john boat is sufficient. If you're fishing on your own, a 10-12 foot long, 32" wide boat will do the job. The "Jesus Boat" that the Lufan brothers discovered measures 27 feet long, 7.5 feet wide, and 4.3 feet high. That works out to 877.5 cubic feet, or about 25 cubic meters. According to tilapia-farming.com, the ideal population of tilapia in a cubic meter of water is 300-400 fish, if you want them to grow to one pound per fish. If you crunch the numbers, you get 10,000 fish per boat (and that's using the ideal conditions for raising tilapia. If you're talking fish caught in a net and dumped in a boat, the number probably goes way up!). Multiply that by two (since Luke tells us, "When they had [put down their nets in the deep water], they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So 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." Luke 5:6-7) and you get a minimum of 20,000 tilapia! That's what you call a whole mess of fish!¹

[As an aside, when I was in Tabasco, Mexico back in the mid-1990's, we ate a lot of tilapia. At one meal, my friend Ricky, an avid fisherman, leaned over and said, "You know you're eating the kind of fish that Jesus and his disciples probably ate." It's true, tilapia is one of the most common fish in the Sea of Galilee, today and in the first century A.D. In English, tilapia is sometimes known as "St. Peter's fish."]

Well, back to that whole mess of fish on the shore of the Sea of Galilee that day in about 30 A.D. What do you suppose happened to all of those fish? Of course, Luke doesn't tell us anything about that, so we'll be running down a rabbit hole if we try to answer that question (although that hasn't stopped many people from suggesting creative answers!). Instead of wondering what happened to that whole mess of fish, let's think about the significance of that many fish. The ridiculously large amount reminds you of the overflowing gallons and gallons of wine at the wedding in Cana, and the twelve baskets of leftovers after the Feeding of the 5000, and the spring of water gushing up to eternal life that Jesus promised the Samaritan woman at the well.

Simon Peter, James, and John were "professional" fishermen. They knew what they were doing. They knew how to fish. They knew where to fish. They knew how many fish they could expect to catch on a good night. They knew how to handle a 27 x 7.5 x 4 foot boat on the Sea of Galilee. They knew they needed to catch a whole mess of fish to keep their fishing business afloat and to feed their families. But none of that knowledge could have prepared them for what happened on Lake Gennesaret early that morning, after a night of hard work that produced the grand total of zero fish caught.

I remember how excited I got when I caught a little bass, just over the keeper limit, on the Roanoke River, when I was fishing with Ricky. He grinned and told me he wouldn't keep it, but I could if I wanted to. I don't know what I would have done if I had caught 20,000 fish! But here's what Simon Peter did – "He fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!'" (Luke 5:8) Despite Simon's initial answer to Jesus' request to head out to the deep waters ("Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing."), he was obedient in the end ("Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."). Simon Peter's amazement at the whole mess of fish they caught made him realize he was out of his league.

Simon Peter's reaction to Jesus ("I am a sinful man") sounds a lot like Isaiah's reaction when he saw "the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple." When Isaiah realized who it was he was seeing, he said, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:5) But, instead of the King, the LORD of hosts bellowing from the throne, "You're right, you sinner! Get out of my sight!" one of the seraphs touched Isaiah's mouth with a hot coal and declared, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." (Isaiah 6:7) Then Isaiah heard the commissioning question that spoke to his heart – "Then I heard the voice of the LORD saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'" And Isaiah said, "Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart." [The chorus of Hymn #69, "Here I Am, Lord," the final hymn in today's worship service.]

When Simon Peter fell down at Jesus' knees and confessed "I am a sinful man!" Jesus didn't say, "You're right! Get out of my sight!" Instead, Jesus told Simon, and also James and John, sons of Zebedee, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." (Luke 5:10) Jesus had commanded Simon to put the boat out into the deep waters and, notice this, to **expect** a catch.

In a reflection on this story, Elisabeth Johnson writes, “How often do we resist Jesus’ claim on our lives because what he is calling us to do seems too crazy, too impractical? How often do we avoid putting out into the deep waters of following and bearing witness to Jesus because we are convinced that we will not see any results? What might it mean for us to go deep-sea fishing with Jesus – to trust and follow him outside our comfort zones, to let go of our certainties, to have our lives radically reoriented?”

Simon and his partners, James and John, weren’t whiling away the time, sitting on the dock, wetting a hook, and shooting the breeze. They worked hard all through the night and, when the night was over, they had more work to do. Luke tells us Jesus “saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.” (Luke 5:2) The dirty and torn nets had to be cleaned and fixed so they would be ready for another night of fishing. Maybe there is a connection between the fishermen washing their nets on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and Jesus telling the self-confessed sinner Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.”

A common understanding of this story has the disciples doing the “fishing for people,” but what about a different perspective? Someone has suggested that Simon Peter and James and John and all of us who hear and respond to Jesus’ call actually become the nets that the Lord, the Great Fisherman, uses. Again, Elisabeth Johnson, “Jesus’ mission does not wait until we think we are ready. The need for the gospel in this broken world is far too urgent. We are called right now – even in spite of our frailty, failures, and doubts, even in the midst of our ordinary, busy, complicated lives. Jesus’ word to Simon Peter is also a word to us: ‘Do not be afraid.’ This is Jesus’ mission, and we trust that he will keep working with us and through us, ‘catching’ others as he has caught us – in the deep, wide net of God’s mercy and love. We trust, finally, that the catch is in God’s hands, and that God’s desire is for the nets to be bursting and the boats full.”²

In other words, a whole mess of fish! I wondered where that phrase came from, so I looked into the origins of “mess,” and this is what I found. “A mess” is “a portion or quantity of food for a meal or dish.” The word’s origins are from the Middle English *messe*, which in turn comes from the Old French *mes*, both of which come from the Old Latin *missus*, which meant a course at a meal. *Missus* is the past participle of the Old Latin verb *mittere* which means to send or to put, as in to send the food out to the table. But here’s where it gets interesting in light of today’s fish tale. *Missus* is also the root word for “mission,” as when Jesus sent the disciples to preach the gospel.

So, there seems to be a connection between “a whole mess of fish” and Jesus’ mission and us being the nets the Lord uses in his fishing and the Lord cleaning and repairing his nets for the next catch. The same idea is reflected in Isaiah’s vision of the LORD on his throne – an awareness of being in God’s presence leads to an awareness and confession of our sinfulness leads to being cleansed and repaired and ready for the LORD’s mission. That’s why our Prayer of Confession is where it is in our order of service. The Call to Worship reminds us we are in God’s presence. The Prayer of

Confession is our response to that awesome privilege, the same as Isaiah and Simon Peter. The Assurance of Pardon, hearing God's Word, and our response to that Word prepare us for another night of fishing as the Lord's nets.

Sir Francis Drake is remembered as "England's most famous sailor and explorer." He sailed around the world on his ship "The Golden Hind." A prayer is attributed to Drake, written before he set sail on one of his famous voyages. In light of this today's gospel story about Jesus, Simon Peter, James, John, a whole mess of fish, and the mission that lies before us, Drake's prayer seems particularly fitting for our lives of faith.

*Disturb us, Lord when
We are too pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true
Because we dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.*

*Disturb us, Lord, when
with the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst
For the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life,
We have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision
Of the new Heaven to dim.*

*Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wilder seas
Where storms will show Your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars.
We ask you to push back
The horizons of our hopes;
And to push back the future
In strength, courage, hope, and love.³*

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, we are pulled in so many directions each day. Call us into your way of life. The world offers us so many different visions of the way things should be. Lead us into your vision of life. We wander off on our own paths. Guide us in your example of living for others. O Jesus, let us hear your call to follow you. Fill our hearts, fill

our eyes, fill our ears with your love. Let us be your hands and feet in the world. Amen.

NOTES

¹Information about the discovery of the boat, size of the boat, and raising tilapia taken from: Neil Patrick, “The Sea of Galilee or ‘the Jesus Boat’ is an ancient fishing boat from the 1st century AD, discovered in 1986,” June 29, 2016 at www.thevintagenews.com; “Sea of Galilee Boat,” at www.en.wikipedia.org; and “Cage Culture of Tilapia (part 2),” at www.tilapia-farming.com.

²Elisabeth Johnson, “Commentary on Luke 5:1-11,” at www.workingpreacher.org.

³Pastor Dwight K. Nelson, “Prayer of Francis Drake,” March 3, 2011 at www.newperceptions.tv/blog