

Sermon: “Rocking the Boat: a fishing story” Luke 5:1-11

[play recording of Stubby Kaye singing “Rock the Boat” from the musical *Guys and Dolls*.]

I have a lot of fishing memories, just not a lot of memorable “catches” to brag about. My Dad was quite the dedicated fisherman. He always had a boat, lots of tackle, and a desire to hit just about any body of water at anytime or time of year, except when the skiers took over the lake. He’d fish in pouring rain, as long as there was no lightning.

Now as I say, I am not much of a fisherman, though I loved the romance of it and now I treasure those times with Dad, especially. A few weeks ago I was sleeping in my father’s bed and looking for bedtime reading I came across his copy of the “Bass Angler’s Bible,” one of those purported how-to books with everything you need to know to catch bass from casting tips, to lures, to where the best lakes and streams are. But you know its one thing to read about fishing, it’s another to actually catch fish. It’s a lot harder than it looks. You have to develop a sense about it. You need the right equipment with the right bait at the right time, place and water temperature. And even then you have to have some luck, or faith.

Today’s lesson from Luke says Jesus was traveling around teaching, with crowds picking up and pressing him, when he finds himself on the edge of Lake Gennesaret or the Sea of Galilee. It’s the same place. Jesus spots a couple of commercial fishing boats on the shore with the fishermen “washing their nets” probably because fishing was so bad. He asks Simon, the later famous Simon Peter, to take him a little ways off-shore so he could continue teaching without the anxiety of the press of the crowd, sort of a floating pulpit. Of course, smart preacher that Jesus was, he realized that he had the fisherman, Simon, captive now and could have him listen to whatever he needed to say. It’s a pretty smart recruiting tactic.

But to set the hook with Simon, Jesus needs to take him fishing. Now this must have seemed a bit preposterous, the wandering rabbi, with no apparent knowledge of fishing or the sea asking Simon, the seasoned professional not only to take him out fishing, but asking him to take Jesus out to “the deep water” in the center of the lake. It’s even trickier to catch fish in deep water. The trick is getting them to come to you. And they have more room to get out of your way. But the fishermen try him out and let down their nets “for a catch,” though nothing has been biting all day. Okay, Master, we will let down our nets, as you say. Maybe something Jesus had said earlier moved Simon to give this unusual rabbi a chance.

The deep can be a scary place. It’s where smaller boats get tossed around, like in the Perfect Storm, like a cork bobbing on your line. I was on a cruise ship last year in the Caribbean, when we hit the “deep water” in a storm. That ship was 3 football fields long, and it still got tossed around something fierce. The deep is not where we naturally long to be. It’s unfamiliar and sometimes threatening territory.

The unexplainable successful catch that Jesus had brought about actually scared these seasoned big-sea fishermen. Their success was threatening to swamp the boats. “Sit down your rocking the boat,” they might have said.

Eugene Peterson has Peter saying to Jesus, "I'm a sinner and I can't handle this holiness." Getting a little too close to God can be hard for a lot of folks to handle, esp. if you drag them out in deep water where they are unfamiliar. We need to think about that when we get church visitors into the boat. It's not always a comfortable feeling to see the power of God that close at hand. Maybe that's why folks sit in the back.

Another minister, Guy Kent, was reminiscing about going fishing the first time with his grandfather. First there was the hearty breakfast of eggs and sausage and grits and biscuits and coffee, saturated with milk, but coffee nonetheless. What a childhood memory. Then there was watching a cork bouncing in the lake while they sat in the small flat bottom rowboat. Grandfather would cast his line. I remember my Dad's beautiful casting. I got a lot of tree-bass. Kent, says neither he nor his granddad caught any fish that day. I have spent a lot of days up and down rivers, or across lakes like that. For true fishermen, the fun is in the trying, but of course, if you are feeding your family, you better bring home some fish.

Much of the Church has forgotten how to fish. We don't do it for fun anymore and we are not feeding our family. Many don't even want to go near the water much less get into the boat. Or they will get in the boat with you awhile, as long as you don't take them out to "deep water." Some of course just want to criticize the Captain for steering them off course.

And then there is that other group, usually the old guard, who like a nice placid water surface, smooth as glass, and even if nothing's biting, they just want to enjoy the peace and quiet. So when Jesus starts threatening their stability with a little too much successful fishing, they want to cry out, "Sit down, for God's sake sit down, you're rocking the boat!"

Two weeks ago, I asked our current classes of elders and deacons to join me on a day-long retreat. We enjoyed the hospitality of our sister church, the First Presbyterian Church of Aurora. We studied the insights and questions of a church growth and transformation scholar named Robert Dale. Dale likes to talk about the Church as a real growing place, a garden of perennials, which grow when successfully tendered with strong deep roots and get more beautiful from year to year. Gardening? Fishing? What does this have to do with the Christian life or the life of the Church?

The officers came up with some new ideas for church life, worship, mission and growth. There were some new ideas and some that have seen successful in the past. They talked to each other about particular projects and plans they had this year, this season. It's one thing to read about keeping your Church vital and healthy, growing and thriving. It's another thing to garden and fish. You cannot learn gardening from a book either. You have to get your hands dirty.

Jesus reassured his new followers, his fishermen disciples, that they did not have to be afraid. He was going to help them re-tool their skills in order to serve a higher calling. They were going to be called by God to "catch" people. Those early disciples and hundreds and thousands after them would take up the call to follow Jesus, to leave the life they knew before and to dedicate themselves to God's work. Everyone is called by God to do something. You have to listen to that voice and respond.

So it is with us too at Providence in Bright. Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea, day by day, his sweet voice soundeth, saying, "Christian, follow me." Alleluia! Amen.