

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
Who's your fishing partner?

One time, while the crowd was pressing in on Jesus and listening to the word of God, he was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret. ² He saw two boats there along the lakeshore. The fishermen had left them and were washing their nets. ³ Jesus got into one of the boats, which belonged to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from the shore. He sat down and began teaching the crowds from the boat. ⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water, and let down your nets for a catch."

⁵ Simon answered him, "Master, we worked hard all through the night and caught nothing. But at your word I will let down the nets." ⁶ When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish, and their nets were about to tear apart. ⁷ They signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸ When Simon Peter saw this, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, because I am a sinful man, Lord." ⁹ For Peter and all those with him were amazed at the number of fish they had caught, ¹⁰ and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.

Jesus said to Simon, "Have no fear. From now on you will be catching people."

¹¹ After they brought their boats to the shore, they left everything and followed him.

—Luke 5:1-11 EHV

Some of you know that I love to fish. When I was a child, my fishing partner was my grandfather. In fact, he taught me how to fish. We started with worms and a bobber and then progressed to more appealing lures. My grandfather died when I was in fourth grade, but up to that time, grandpa was my fishing partner.

And as a child, I thought he was the greatest fisherman of all time. One time we caught over 100 fish in just a couple hours. I thought he was the greatest.

But as my fishing partner, my grandpa had some shortcomings. One of his shortcomings is that he didn't know how to swim. He had a rule that I needed to learn how to swim if I went fishing with him. I guess that made sense since he didn't know how to swim.

He also hated wearing a lifejacket. One time he was fishing in a channel and fell overboard into the water. He sank like a rock to the bottom of the 10 foot channel. He told the story that he just started kicking and surfaced where he grabbed the boat that was right above him. So, my fishing partner didn't know how to swim.

But there was another shortcoming that my fishing partner had. He struggled to tie his own hooks. I suppose that worked out okay because I had to learn how to tie my own hooks and lures. But the reason he struggled to tie his line was because he only had a thumb and an index finger on his right hand. Years earlier he got his hand caught in a corn picker and lost three fingers on his right hand. So, he wanted me to learn how to tie hooks, sharpen hooks, and put on bait or lures. He had some shortcomings when it came to fishing. But grandpa, at least until fourth grade, was my fishing partner.

In the Gospel for today, we see a different kind of fishing placed before us. Jesus calls Peter, James, and John to stop fishing for fish and instead they **"will be catching people."** And Luke tells us, **"After they brought their boats to the shore, they left everything and followed [Jesus]."** But what is it that caused them to do that? What is it that prompted them to leave everything and follow Jesus and learn from him?

I ask those questions because in a similar way Jesus is calling you to catch people as well. No, he hasn't asked you to leave your jobs in order to go to Seminary school. But he does want you to share the message of salvation with people in your lives. He wants you to let your light shine so that others can glorify your heavenly Father. He wants you to be his witnesses to the people in your family, neighborhoods, and lives. In other words, Jesus wants you to be catching people as well. What will prompt you to do that?

Well, let's go back to Luke 5. I ask you this question: **Who's your fishing partner?** Luke writes, **"One time, while the crowd was pressing in on Jesus and listening to the word of God, he was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret.** (We know that body of water as the Sea of Galilee.) ² **He saw two boats there along the lakeshore. The fishermen had left them and were washing their nets.** ³ **Jesus got into one of the boats, which belonged to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from the shore. He sat down and began teaching the crowds from the boat.** ⁴ **When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water, and let down your nets for a catch."**

Just put yourself there for a moment. Imagine being Peter. He had been up all night fishing. He spent time on the water during the primo time for catching fish. And what did he have to show for all his effort? Nada. They didn't catch

one single fish. So, during the day time, the fishermen knew what to do – wash the nets. It's time to go home. It's time to call it a day. It's time to get some rest.

But while they were nearing the end of the shift, Jesus comes along the shore. And he's got quite the following. The crowds are pressing on him. He's trapped between the crowds and the sea. So, Jesus turns a boat into a pulpit. It happened to be Peter's boat.

This isn't the first time Peter had contact with Jesus. Jesus had some followers already. Peter had contact with him. In fact, Peter was with Jesus when he turned water into wine. He saw Jesus heal his mother-in-law from a high fever. Peter has seen Jesus in action. He is acquainted with Jesus at this point.

So, Peter agrees to push off from shore and let Jesus continue to teach the Word of God. Luke doesn't tell us how long Jesus preached. Was it an hour? Two hours? We don't know. But Peter doesn't complain about that. Jesus kept Peter and the crowd captivated with his words. His *words*.

But then Jesus had a really strange request for Peter. **“Put out into the deep water, and let down your nets for a catch.”** How would you have reacted to Jesus' words? “Um, Jesus, I know you are a skilled carpenter and you are a great teacher, but do you know anything about fishing? **Master, we worked hard all through the night and caught nothing.** We gave the effort. We even fished during the primetime. We're washing our nets and getting ready to go home.”

Peter was in a situation where if he followed Jesus' words, Peter would be doing something that goes contrary to fishing logic. And here's where you get this impression that Peter wanted to save his own reputation as a fisherman, so to speak. He says, **“But at your word I will let down the nets.”** It doesn't make sense, but at the utterances of your mouth, I will do it. Against all logic, I will let down the nets. And if it fails, let's remember that it was because of your *words*, Jesus, that I let down the nets. I almost picture Peter patting Jesus on the shoulder and saying, “Okay, Master, we'll try it your way.”

My friends, **who's your fishing partner? “When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish, and their nets were about to tear apart. They signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.”** Wow! It wasn't just that Jesus knew where the fish would be. Plenty of good fishermen can pinpoint where fish are at. But Jesus actually *caused* this catch to happen. Jesus actually has power to control fish. So many fish that they needed to call in reinforcements. I wonder if they had to start throwing some of them back as their boats began to sink. Just ponder that.

And if you ponder this for a second, think about this. What if Peter had politely refused to go fishing? What if Peter politely made excuses when Jesus uttered these words? Not only would it have been disrespectful to Jesus, but Peter would have missed out on this incredible miracle. Just think about that. When Peter followed Jesus' words, even if it seemed foolish, even if it seemed illogical, Jesus blessed his efforts.

What about situations in your personal lives that defy your logic? What about the situations that are personal and difficult, maybe even risky and painful?

Jesus gives you some pretty big promises when it comes to putting him first in your lives. Give your firstfruit offerings to the Lord, and he promises to take care of you. But what does logic say? “I've got a lot of bills to pay. I'm drowning in debt. I can't give to the Lord.” And might you miss a blessing that the Lord had prepared just for you?

God tells you that your marriage is a commitment for life, even through the difficulties and challenges. But what does logic say? “My husband is rude and lazy. My wife spends too much money. We have fallen out of love. We've tried the counseling thing. It just doesn't work. What good does it do? We're both miserable. It's just easier to file for a divorce.” And might you miss a blessing that the Lord had prepared just for your marriage?

God tells you to wait until marriage. Don't move in together. Don't pretend you are married or play house as though you are married. But what does logic say? “You don't know *my* situation. It's just not practical to wait. We can't afford it. Lord, I know what you're saying, but that doesn't make sense in this situation. We know better than you do, Lord. We're going to do our own thing.” And might you miss a blessing that the Lord had prepared just for you?

You see, God's word doesn't always make sense logically. When you rationalize something, you convince yourself that you know better than the Lord. A *better* response to an illogical situation might simply be, “But at your word, Lord, I will do it.”

You see, that's why we read the Bible. That's why we study its history and memorize its passages. It's how the Holy Spirit builds faith in us and gets us to see how powerful and gracious God is. The words and promises of God build faith in our hearts, so that when he asks us to do something that seems foolish or odd or useless or illogical, we do it anyway.

Even though it didn't make sense to Peter, he followed through on Jesus' word, and just look at the miracle Jesus had prepared for Peter. My friends, **who is your fishing partner?**

“When Simon Peter saw this, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, because I am a sinful man, Lord.” For Peter and all those with him were amazed at the number of fish they had caught, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.”

Peter recognized he had no place being in the same boat with Jesus. **“Go away from me, because I am a sinful man, Lord.”** I don’t think Peter really meant this. It was like asking Jesus, “Do you really want *me* here, Lord?” Here he had just doubted Jesus, just patted Jesus on the head, threw him a cookie, only doing what he was told because Jesus told him to do it. Yet Jesus, in grace and in mercy, gave him a miraculous catch of fish nonetheless. Peter didn’t feel worthy to stand in Jesus’ presence.

But Jesus didn’t say, “Okay, Peter. You’re right. Pull up to shore. I’ll leave.” No! Listen carefully to Jesus’ response. Jesus said to Simon, **“Have no fear.”** Yes, Peter was kneeling in the presence of God. He recognized that he didn’t belong there. Yet Jesus says, **“Have no fear.”** And he says the same thing to you. **“Have no fear.”**

Why not? Because he didn’t come down here to condemn us. He came down here to save us. He came to stand, not just next to us, but in place of us. He came to claim as his own our doubts and our fears and our logical reasoning in defiance of God’s word. He came, not to walk away from us, but to draw us close to him.

He still does that for you through Word and Sacrament. He draws you near. As holy as he is and as sinful as you are, Jesus draws you to himself through his Word. He announces through words and with bread and wine, “Your sins are forgiven.” He doesn’t walk away, but he draws you near. And then he sends you out with that same powerful Word.

My friends, **who’s your fishing partner?** This miraculous catch of fish might seem minor in the big picture of things. These fish had no souls. Their lives were temporary to begin with. At best they’d pay off a few bills and supply a few meals. When all was said and done, it seems the disciples just left them there. Perhaps the people who came to listen brought home a nice meal that night. But Jesus wanted the disciples to see that he was their fishing partner.

This miracle was meant to show Peter, James, and John something important. **“From now on you will be catching people.”** Jesus was their fishing partner for souls.

No, they wouldn’t have to use ropes. They wouldn’t have to use boats. They would simply speak the Word of God to people, tell them to repent, pour some water on them, and watch God work his miracles. By using the Word and sacrament, the Holy Spirit would use the disciples to capture humanity’s hearts and souls.

Just think about the twist Jesus gives in these words. Fish are caught to be killed, filleted, fried, and eaten. Perhaps they were sold to merchants or put on display.

But not with people. People are caught in order to give them life and bring them on the pathway to eternity. Fish are taken *out* of the water. Humans are put *into* the water. Fish die out of the water. Humans die in the water, not physically, but spiritually, in their baptisms as their sinful natures are buried with Jesus in his death and then raised out of the water with him in his resurrection. Humans are given life and purpose when they are caught by Jesus.

My friends, **who’s your fishing partner?** God has chosen to use simple people like you and me with simple words to perform this awesome task, of rescuing people out of the flood waters of death and hell and of bringing them on the boat to heaven.

So, Jesus makes you his fishing partner. And unlike my grandpa, Jesus doesn’t have any shortcomings. In fact, he lives forever and is always with you. Sure, it can be intimidating to share God’s Word with friends, family, neighbors, coworkers and even enemies.

But **who’s your fishing partner?** If Jesus was able to make fish jump into a net and into a boat to be killed, he can certainly enable humans to jump into the boat of salvation to be saved. So, as your fishing partner, Jesus says, “Let’s go fishing.” Amen.