

**Sermon: February 7, 2010**  
**Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**Text: Luke 5: 1-11**

### ***LEAVING EVERYTHING BEHIND?***

What a difference a week makes. Last Sunday our Gospel ended with a large angry crowd gathered around Jesus, threatening to kill him for his teachings. Today our Gospel begins with a much friendlier crowd eager to experience the word of God.

Surrounded by the crowds, Jesus notices that there are two boats at the shore with fishermen nearby cleaning their nets after an unsuccessful night of fishing. He gets into one of the boats, the one owned by Simon and Jesus asks him to take out a little bit off shore. But Jesus isn't here for a fishing lesson. He asks to go out on the boat so he can preach to the crowds eager to hear the Word of God.

When Jesus finished teaching the crowd, he gave a fishing tip to Simon. It was not a new fishing technique, but rather Jesus gave some advice about the location to place his finishing nets. But Simon was tired from working all night without catching any fish. And he had already tried the spot where Jesus says to put down his nets. And what could Jesus possibly know about fishing?

Nevertheless, Simon agreed to drop his nets. And what happens next is just the first of many surprises. The nets overflow to the breaking point. In fact, there are so many fish that others are to help bring in the bounty. Luke tells us that both boats are so full, they begin to sink. Where hours before, there were no fish, now there were plenty. Where once there was scarcity, there is now abundance.

We don't know what the crowds thought of this miraculous event occurring just off the shore. Nor do we know if they even understood what was out on the waters before them. But Simon knows that something extraordinary has happened. He knows that such miracles don't occur without the presence of the divine. He understands that he is in the presence of a Holy Man. So he falls down on his knees before Jesus and says, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

Joining Simon in amazement at what had just taken place are three other fishermen. Their names are James and Andrew, sons of Zebedee. Jesus then says to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." We are then told that when these three men finally got on shore with their bounty of fish, they leave everything and follow Jesus.

One wonders what these three men are thinking at this point. Did they really leave this miraculous catch on the shore to rot or to be gathered up by others? Did they really leave behind their family and friends. Did they really walk away from their only source of income? What did they expect to happen when Jesus tells them that they are going to "catch people".

For Simon, James and John, this is a major turning point in their lives. We go on to discover that by inviting these three to catch people, Jesus is asking them participate in his mission to share the Good News of God's love and salvation to all people. They are the first of many to become one of his disciples.

We all know that there are times in our lives when the course of our life takes an unexpected turn. And I don't know about you, but I haven't always embraced these changes in my life. Yet if there is anything we can be certain about, it is that life is filled with changes.

Having said that, I don't there has ever been I time when I have felt that I was being asked to leave everything behind in order to move forward into something new in my life. Certainly, every time I have made a move, every time I have taken a new call, every time I have made a new commitment or established a new relationship, there has been an element of leaving something else behind. But there has never been a time when I have felt that I was leaving everything behind.

When you and I were baptized in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we were called to follow Jesus. Through water and word, we were given a new identity (child of God) and a new mission (share the goods news). Each one of us is given gifts to live fully in this new identity and mission.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we may not be asked to leave everything behind. But we are asked to commit ourselves fully to lives of faithful discipleship. As a disciple of Jesus Christ, you are asked to love the "Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind"; and to love "your neighbor as yourself". (Luke 10:27)

I'd like to direct the focus of this message, at this point, away from what this Gospel means to us as individuals and towards what these words mean to us a community of faith. What lessons might we learn as reflect upon our past and envision our future as the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Ascension?

For 50 years this congregation has been a witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Northfield and its surrounding communities. Countless numbers of people have confessed Jesus as Lord, have been baptized in the name of the triune God, and have gathered together to worship, to pray, to learn, to share, to encourage, to invite and to give witness to their faith. For the first 30 – 40 years or so, this resulted in amazing growth with a baptized membership of over 800 as recently as 2001. However, in the last decade, we have seen a significant drop in membership. Between 2001 and 2008 baptized membership has decreased from 836 to 566, a 31% decrease. Not surprisingly, our average worship attendance has declined in that same period by a similar percentage.

Now admittedly, if you look at the statistics of our sister ELCA congregations in the communities, you will see similar declines. For some the decline has been less dramatic, for some there has been a greater decline, and one congregation, Wilmette Lutheran even closed its door this past year. We are told that two out of every three congregations in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod can be described as declining congregations.

Now some may take comfort in knowing that we are not alone. Still others may say that the decline of mainline Protestantism is inevitable. But others ask such questions as “why is this happening?” and “does it need to be this way”?

Our Bishop, Wayne Miller, his staff and other leadership in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod firmly believes that such decline is not inevitable. That is why they introduced the Turnaround Synod Initiative last summer. The goal of this initiative is to turn at least half of those declining congregations into growing congregations by the year 2013. So instead of 2/3 of the MCS congregations being in decline, 2/3 of the congregations will be growing. It is, admittedly, an ambitious task, but one our bishop believes is attainable.

Now let us be clear, the Turnaround Synod Initiative is not a program. There is no formula that every congregation can use to turn things around. Every congregation is unique in terms of its history, and culture and dynamics. What the Turnaround Synod Initiative is a process. The synod is offering to its congregations a variety of resources and tools from which each congregation can chose to use in its process of renewal.

Last fall, your church council made the decision to participate in a renewal process through the Turnaround Synod Initiative. We are one of eleven congregations that have signed on to the initiative. Already, we have taken some steps in the process. Many of you participated in the on-line TAG survey. The results and a summary report have been made available to you. Those results reveal some interesting things about how we feel about the ministry at Ascension. We certainly have a lot of room to grow.

We have also decided to participate in the Koinonia Leadership program. This program allows us to train 7-8 individuals per year in the dynamics of Biblically based church leadership. The program is lead by same core team that leads the Stephen Ministries training. Stephen Ministries has a 30 year history of quality training and follow-through.

Your staff have begun to work through a book called Path Ways to Renew: A Process for congregational Transformation. One of the things that we have learned is that turning a congregation around is a process and not an event. We are told that it takes up to seven years to assimilate change in a congregation’s culture. Congregational renewal is hard work. Most of us are resistant to change. Many people would rather hold on to what is familiar in a congregation, even if a congregation is in decline. However, change is inevitable, and successful congregations are those who are able to make the changes necessary to face a changing world without letting go of their core values.

So as a congregation, we are a lot like Peter, John and Paul on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. We are faced with a moment of decision. Do we decide to accept Christ's invitation to do something new, or do we decide to stay with what is familiar and fish in the same unproductive waters? If we say yes to the invitation to embrace a renewed future, how we will decide what it is that we will need to leave behind. To embrace a new vision is not to deny the work that has gone before us. It simply acknowledges that God is inviting us to do something new, to try fresh approaches, to move outside of our comfort zone in order to be a faithful witness and presence in the Northfield community for years to come.

I am excited about the possibilities. But that is easy for me to say, because I don't have the historical memory of this place like most of you do. I don't have the emotional attachments to this place that many of you do. I came here because I saw the potential of this faith community and was pleased to know that at least some of you were willing to explore the possibilities of transformation and renewal.

So all I can say is that like Peter, James and John, we are invited to follow Jesus into some unknown future. We can say no – and stay with what is familiar and comfortable. Or we can say yes – and trust that the Holy Spirit will lead the way.

Thanks be to God. Amen.