

The Fifth Sunday after Trinity
9 July, Anno Domini 2023
St. Luke 5:1-11

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Beloved in the Lord,

I imagine that looking around you've probably asked yourself whether faith still possible in this world that is dominated by unbelief and secularism and hedonism. Is the Word of God enough to turn a person away from Is the idea of evangelism even worth discussing when it seems dangerous to speak of Christ outside these walls? It may feel that way. You may think that it's too dangerous to engage in evangelism because of threats to your job or your reputation. And the proof is right in front us. Believing and confessing the Christian faith most certainly comes with risk. One does not bear the Name of Christ without standing in the shadow of the cross. You can be taken to court for denying services to causes that are contrary to your faith. Some places are trying to make it illegal for parents to deny surgery to their children who express any kind of gender dysphoria. The state of Michigan just passed legislation that would punish using the "wrong" pronouns when referring to someone. I think it's safe to say that we can finally lay to rest the nonsensical idea that the world is hungry for the Gospel. The world hates the Gospel and those who believe and confess it. The world needs the Gospel to be sure. But it most certainly doesn't want it.

Perhaps if we take the safer road and try to bring people to the faith by speaking as little about the Word of God as possible. Say nothing that might make someone feel uncomfortable. Don't make any exclusive claims or insist that sin is to be hated and avoided or even that anything is actually sin. It's bad business to say and do things that alienate your customers. Just provide people with a warm and inviting atmosphere, a good cup of coffee, and some feel-good music. Say things to and about them that make them feel comfortable with you and good about themselves. People need a pick-me-up, a dose of courage, and a plan of action that they can go implement when they get home. And who is going to deny that such efforts don't work? If you want people to show up you need to appeal to them – find out what they enjoy, what they like to hear, the music that they

listen to, what their expectations are, and then give them those things. After all that, once you've lured them in, then maybe you can say something about Jesus, but make sure that it is only positive, feel-good, and affirming.

And while that might make good business sense, look around. The world isn't buying it. Churches and church bodies like the Anglicans who are working on deciding whether or not it is appropriate to call God "Father", are actually fairing worse than those church bodies that are to one degree or another trying to push back against the cultural paganism that surrounds them. The number of people claiming no religious affiliation is on the rise. The churches that are fairing best are actually those who offer substance and an alternative to the depravity and hollowness of the culture.

Perhaps Jesus' method is a good example to follow since He found Himself deep in the mire of a pagan and self-righteous world. Now to say that His methods were a little unorthodox by today's standards is an understatement. Ask any marketing agency to evaluate the methods and success of Jesus' ministry and they will invariably tell you that it was a disaster and failure from start to finish. Jesus was down-right foolish. As St. Mark records it, Jesus' first words were "Repent and believe." That isn't such a great way to make people like you.

Peter and his business partners learned quickly that Jesus wasn't interested in making you like Him. He wasn't worried about how many people listened. Of course He wanted everyone to hear and believe but He didn't temper His speech, He didn't soften His call to repentance, He didn't do any demographic studies, surveys, or questionnaires to find out what people wanted or thought they needed most. Jesus' lesson in evangelism began with a simple but very odd command – put out the nets in the middle of the day in deep water. Neither of these things is proper for fishing. You fished at night, close to shore. And when you are fishing with nets you are simply wasting your time in deep water. The best you will do is catch some junk fish, if even that. But Jesus is not teaching these expert fishermen about fishing – not for fish anyway. He is teaching them about Himself, about faith, and soon He will show them the truth about themselves.

Now, no one today is really surprised by the catch of fish. This is Jesus, after all. He created the fish and the water in which they swim. If He wants there to be fish in the deep, they will be there. Surely the fishermen had to

be overjoyed at this unlikely haul. This is what they had worked all night for with no success. Their prayers had been answered. They were going to go back to shore, boast of the success of their hard work, sell their bounty, pay off their mortgage and credit cards, and of course give a little to the church. But what at first seemed like a great blessing quickly became a curse. There were too many fish. Even a second boat wasn't enough to contain what had been caught and both boats began to sink. This blessing was about to kill them.

Suddenly, Peter's thoughts turned away from the riches such a catch would have brought. Peter was forced to realize that the fish weren't even the problem. It was the Lord who had commanded them to set out. It was the Lord who had said to throw the nets out. He was the problem. The Lord was killing them! Peter then understood that this Jesus was not just a wise master. He was the Lord God of heaven and earth to whom all will one day give an account. Peter was immediately reminded of his own sin and what this God who was standing right in front of him should rightly do to him. Peter fell at Jesus' feet and, like the demons, begged Him to leave. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" The presence of the Lord is very dangerous. He kills fishermen and sinners of all kinds, because the wages of sin is death.

Cruel? Unnecessary? Ineffective? Foolish? Unloving? This is certainly how the world would judge Jesus' action. But what Jesus does to Peter is what must be done to all sinners. We are so blinded by our sin that we think our worst problem is the loss of our job or house, our difficult child, or our unfaithful spouse. We must all be made Peters. Our Lord must bring us to the very brink of death to force us to see that, in fact, we are already dead...dead in our sin and out trespasses. The crosses that are laid upon us are meant to be heavy. They are meant to be more than we can bear. Through them the Lord works to bring forth the prayer of Psalm 51 from our lips "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, you delight in truth in the inward begin, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart."

Our Lord's evangelism begins with death. Your Old Adam must daily be drowned and die along with all its evil desires and thoughts of self-

righteousness so that you would look to Jesus, the gift of God, who brings you eternal life. Terrifying Peter wasn't Jesus' end game and it certainly wasn't to destroy Peter or any other sinner. This is God's alien work - judgment and condemnation. He is not interested in making you comfortable or pandering to your personal taste. He exposes our evil and our degradation only so that He can do His proper work, the work that reveals His true nature and desire - forgiving, redeeming, saving. That is how God desires to be known. In Jesus, and no where else, can we find peace with God because all our sins have been laid on Jesus. Jesus is the embodiment of God's love and will. We know and receive the love and mercy of God through what Jesus does for us, NOT through what we do for God. The wisdom of the ancients and of our own age cannot possibly imagine a more foolish thing...except perhaps, the way in which Jesus makes Christians - by killing sinners and raising them to life. Foolish worldly wisdom would always have you look to your own obedience, your own goodness as your source of comfort. But the conscience that has been struck by God knows that there is no comfort to be found there. All of Peter's expertise and knowledge were of no use to him. They couldn't save him from God's hand.

But God has put such false and lying wisdom to shame. "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs, and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

In the tiny babe of Bethlehem the mercy of God came to dwell among His broken creation. In the unimpressive form of Joseph's adopted son, the fullness of God dwells bodily. In the bruised, pierced, blood-soaked flesh of Jesus, the wisdom of God shines forth as a bright light scattering the death and darkness that had fallen over us. In the otherwise plain waters of Holy Baptism you have been caught up into the death and resurrection of Jesus and are now counted as righteous in God's sight. Under a tasteless little wafer and a bit of cheap wine, the very body and blood of Christ crucified is placed in your mouth, bringing to you the forgiveness of all your sins and the assurance of your salvation.

Undoubtedly, these things do appear unimpressive and foolish. Why else would they be despised and rejected by so many? But don't worry. That is how God wants it. That is how God does evangelism and grows His Church. He brings sinners to the death of repentance and the life of absolution in Christ. It is no different today than it was in Jesus' day because sinners are still the same. No gimmicks. Just the pure Word of God bringing sinners of all kinds to repentance and faith in Jesus, to death and to new life. He sends fishers of men to all the ends of the earth to cry out "Repent and believe in Jesus." It doesn't make sense. But God in His wisdom has saved weak and foolish people like us by foolish means. He has cast out the net of the Gospel and by it rescued us from the depths of our sin. There is no other way. You must die if you are to live. But do not fear. Jesus stands before you today not to destroy you but to save you, to forgive you, to show you the love and compassion of your Heavenly Father. Your sins are forgiven and eternal life in Christ Jesus is yours. Come to the shores of His holy altar where He gives you peace.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.