

The Fifth Sunday after Trinity | St. Luke 5:1-11
July 16, 2017 | Saude & Jerico Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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O Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, You have given us Your holy Word and have bountifully provided for all our earthly needs: We confess that we are unworthy of all these mercies, and that we have rather deserved punishment. But we beseech You, forgive us our sins, and prosper and bless us in our various callings, that by Your strength we may be sustained and defended, now and forever, and so praise and glorify You eternally; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (ELH, p. 159)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for this morning is taken from the fifth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on Him to hear the word of God, [Jesus] was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, and He saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, He asked him to put out a little from the land. And He sat down and taught the people from the boat. And when He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." / And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at Your word I will let down the nets." And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. / But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. / And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him. (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who did the work we had hardly even begun and were not about to finish, dear fellow redeemed:

A relative of mine once gave a ride to a man looking to head west. Along the way, the man shared details about his life, which might be described as "professional homelessness." He decided at some point that he would rather beg than work a paying job. And whenever he had built up enough money, he would spend it on an airline ticket to Hawaii. He had done this multiple times. It takes work to beg, so it wasn't that he would not work. What he rejected was *honest* work. In the end, I think my cousin may have regretted offering the ride.

It was wrong for this man to take advantage of the charity of others when he could have easily gotten a job. He did not see the value in this kind of work. On the other hand, some place too

much value in their work. They are constantly seeking to climb higher on the corporate ladder and improve their life with greater riches and nicer things. They may even neglect their family and friends to do this. They will let nothing get in the way of their drive to succeed.

But in the end, what good is an attitude like this? Does a person ever get to the point where he is satisfied with what he has? And what will happen to those precious belongings when he dies? The wise King Solomon pondered these very questions. He considered all that his hands had done and the toil he had expended, and concluded that *“all was vanity and a striving after wind”* (Ecc. 2:11). He said that *“there is more gain in wisdom than in folly,”* but in the end, *“the wise dies just like the fool!”* (vv. 13, 16). He also recognized that everything he had worked for would one day be turned over to another to keep and manage, *“and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool?”* (v. 19).

I

When Jesus visited the fishermen by the lake of Gennesaret, they understood better than ever that work is meaningless apart from Jesus. These men fished not for leisure but for their livelihood, which made a night’s work with no return especially frustrating. We might have expected Simon Peter’s response to be a bit saltier than it was when Jesus directed him to row to the deep part of the lake and let down his nets. For one thing, it was not the right time of day for fishing. And the deeper parts of the lake were probably not the best places to find fish. But Simon replied respectfully, *“Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at Your word I will let down the nets.”*

It wasn’t long before the fishermen saw the nets start to drag along as though they were filling up. In a short time their nets were so full, that two fishing boats could not handle the load. So much for all their fishing wisdom! This stranger Jesus came along and prompted the greatest catch of fish they had ever seen! Now they were keenly aware of a power in their presence that was much greater than their own. They did not doubt that they had just witnessed a miracle, which meant Jesus was either a prophet of God or God Himself. Simon fell to his knees and said, *“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”*

What Simon had forgotten at that moment is something that we lose sight of too. This is that we are always in the presence of God, and that we cannot prosper in work without His blessing. So often we experience some success at work and are praised for what we accomplish, and we think of this as well-earned recognition. We worked hard for this and did what others could not do. It is not wrong to take pride in a job well done. But it is wrong to take full credit for it. If you are a farmer, who is it that sends the sun and rain for your crops? If you work for an employer, who gave you the mental and physical abilities you have? If your kids grow up to be reasonably responsible citizens, who granted you the patience and care you needed to raise them?

To act as though God has nothing to do with our successes – which is what every unbeliever thinks – is to greatly dishonor Him. Unbelievers see their success as entirely dependent on themselves and even flaunt their riches in God’s face, as though He had nothing to do with it. But unless He opens His merciful hand and gives His blessings, no creature could live. He satisfies the desire of every living thing, as the Psalm says (145:16).

But we do not always feel satisfied with His gifts. Sometimes, like the disciples, we work hard and come up with nothing. Why is that? Why do we wear ourselves out and lose ground while the unrighteous appear to prosper? Has God forgotten our need? It is easy to question God when we are struggling, but it is just as easy to forget Him when we prosper. This may be why God sometimes gives us more and sometimes less – to remind us to trust in Him.

No matter how hard you work, if your work is not done to the glory of God, it is empty. No amount of money and goods will satisfy you without Jesus in view. Peter, James, and John recognized this. Even after the greatest catch of fish they had ever seen, they left it all behind. “[T]hey left everything and followed [Jesus].”

II

They followed Jesus because He called them to a different kind of fishing. Now they would be “catching men” for God. But they were not prepared to help fill God’s net until they were caught themselves. When Simon saw the great catch of fish, He begged Jesus to leave him, because he was a sinner. What sin do you suppose was on his mind? Was it that he doubted any fish would be caught when he “put out into the deep”? Or was it just a general awareness of his sinfulness as He stood before his Lord? The prophet Isaiah reacted in much the same way in the presence of God in heaven, “Woe is me! For I am lost” he said; “for I am a man of unclean lips” (Is. 6:5). But the last thing Simon Peter needed is what he requested. When he said, “Depart from me,” he should have said, “Save me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!”

Being in the presence of God and hearing His Word forces us to reckon with our sins. We hear the standard that God sets and realize how far we fall short of meeting it. But instead of crying out to Jesus, “Save me!” we try to make things better on our own. We know that the sin we have fallen into is condemned by God, and we want to stop doing it. But instead of trusting in Him, we put our trust in ourselves. “I am strong enough to overcome this,” we think. “I know I am better than this, and I will prove it!” And what happens? We fall again and again. And eventually, we lose the will to fight anymore. Sometimes we continue in the sin despite the conflict we feel in our conscience, or we begin to justify the sin in an attempt to rewire our conscience.

Our flailing attempts to get free of God’s accusing law are like a bird caught in a fishing net. The harder it tries to get away, the more tangled up it becomes. This is how it was with Martin Luther. We focused on his life and work last week at camp. Luther had tried to get right with God by his works. He even gave up a promising career in law in order to become a monk, so that he could dedicate his life to righteous living full-time.

But the harder he worked, the more his net of righteousness came up empty. He expressed this painful realization in a hymn verse which the campers memorized this past week: “Fast bound in Satan’s chains I lay; / Death brooded darkly o’er me. / Sin was my torment night and day; / In sin my mother bore me. / Yea, deep and deeper still I fell; / Life had become a living hell, / So firmly sin possessed me” (ELH 378, v. 2).

It wasn’t that Luther was more sinful than the common man. But he was more honest about his sinful condition than many are. No matter how hard you and I try, we are still sinners, who

deserve death. “[T]he wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 6:23).

By God’s grace, Luther eventually understood that the righteousness God requires of sinners is supplied by Jesus. To try to get to heaven without Him is to come up empty. But to place one’s entire life and being in His hands through repentant faith is to obtain everything. By faith in Jesus, your net is filled with forgiveness for your many sins, with eternal life for your death, and with salvation from your enemies. Faith receives such abundant blessings from God that you sink beneath their glorious weight. God’s grace surrounds you and covers you, so that your flimsy attempts at righteousness can no more be seen. All that is now in view is the righteousness of Jesus and His cleansing blood.

That is why we follow Him. He gives us what we could never get on our own. **Our Constant Toiling Nets Nothing without Jesus.** Romans 4:5 declares, “*And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.*” It is not your work that justifies you before God, but faith in Jesus. Do not in willful disobedience ask Him to depart, but in humble repentance beg Him to stay.

And He will stay. He worked hard to save you, and He isn’t about to let that hard work on your behalf go to waste. This is why He comes to you still and continues to work in you through His Word and Sacraments. There, He supplies forgiveness whenever your God-given work falls short, and He grants the strength that you need to carry out your work to His glory alone.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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