LUKE 5.1-11 Fifth after Epiphany 10.2.2019

A *Punch* cartoon has an avid angler fishing in waders in an icy Scottish stream adjacent to a mental hospital. The rain is bucketing down. An inmate climbed the wall and asked “What are you doing? “Fishing.” “Caught anything?” “No.” “How long have you been there?” “Five hours.” The inmate beckoned “Come inside.”

Yesterday, Jesus had come to cure Simon Peter’s mother-in-law of malarial fever. The next day, as he came to a spot to preach, there was Peter and his fishermen friends cleaning their nets. Around them on the shoreline, the milling crowd began to crush to hear the word of God. Now, Simon owed Jesus one, so he asked that Si might let his boat drift away from the shore a space so that he might use it as a floating pulpit. Done.

Now, it was mid-morning and the preaching was over. As an act of gratitude, Jesus asked these professional fishermen to launch out into the deep to try for a fulsome catch. He did not believe that failure was final. Simon felt that this imposition by a jaunty landlubber carpenter was irrational. He may have muttered “Rabbi, do you want me to make a fool of myself in front of all these fisher folk? We’ve worked all night long, but we caught nothing.” Simon was exhausted, drained, dispirited; he just wanted to go home to sleep. He didn’t tell Jesus about the one that got away; not the one. All the fish had got away. Going out again would be just as futile. But Simon owed Jesus for his wife’s mother’s cure and, with his brother Andrew, put weight to oar.

No sooner had the pair let their net hit the water, than it miraculously filled with suicidal, death-seeking fish. Unprecedented in a hopelessly fished out location, the overwhelming catch exceeded any expectation. Simon was forced to call on his partners, James and John to help, and both boats nearly sank under the weight of fish.

It was the same lake as last night, the same boats, the same nets, the same crews, the same minds seeking fish.

Every Sunday, the ark of the Ascension pulls out into the same lake here, with the same crew, the same goals and the same mind to have blessings pour into its net. The lake of Galilee gave nothing. What does the parish of Ascension give?

What made the difference on the lake? The answer is: Jesus was in the boat. Without him we fish in vain. Jesus showed the disciples he can catch fish with them, when they cannot do so on their own. Is he truly present in our parish boat, today?

This was the turning point in the lives of Simon, Andrew, and their partners, James and John. What began as a fishing failure, ended in a new beginning, a new cause to dedicate themselves, a new life direction to follow as fishers of people.

Simon was so overcome at Jesus’ divine power that *had* he gone into partnership with a fish-spotter like Jesus, he knew he would be a winner. Now, his eyes were opened, his mind filled with wonder, and his heart confessed: “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” He believed that he was a failure at fishing and as a person. Simon was fearful of launching into the deep waters of total commitment. It would be less trouble if Jesus just went away, and left the limited fisher-folk to their sporadic fishing. Simon had not grasped that it was to call sinners just like him, that Jesus had come into their lives.

Jesus met Simon where he was, as he was, and called him. Jesus meets us, where we are, and calls us. Immediately, Jesus gave him and gives us a new vocation: “from now on, you will be catching people” in a life-long vocation. The difference is: caught fish die, but caught people live.

As the fisherfolk showed, it is possible to do one’s best, yet, at the end of a night’s fishing, to have nothing to show for it. What we need from failure is not blame but belief in us, to encourage us, to challenge us. Failure is not final. Failure is falling down, and staying down.

Jesus did not encourage his men to wallow in self-pity. He challenged them to try again, to go beyond themselves: “Put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

Jesus calls imperfect people like Simon, aware of their unworthiness, just as they are. Then, he works on making them into faithful disciples. “Just as I am, though tossed about, with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears, within, without, O Lamb of God, I come.

In an instant, Jesus had reeled in Simon, his brother Andrew, James and John, and they were hooked for life, unsure, un-whole, imperfect beings. Having just brought in the greatest catch of their fishing careers, a mountain of fish, they now knew what was possible, and their encounter with Jesus completely reoriented their utterly mundane lives.

But, would you put a man like Simon, in charge of your Church, who’s walked out on a wife and family? Would you give a guernsey to James and John, two irresponsible sons gone missing with a vagrant carpenter, leaving poor daddy Zebedee to front his formidable Lady Bracknell look-alike-wife, who was home and expecting trout for tea?

Are we real fishers of people going out to the whole world? Or is Ascension more of a parish aquarium, to which we come Sunday by Sunday to drop in little pieces of fish food? We come and hear, but do we then go and tell to share the Good News of Christ in word and deed to all we meet in the coming week?

What might it mean for us to put out into the deep waters of discipleship, to cast off our old priorities and align ourselves with Jesus’ new priorities, and then, to bear true witness to Jesus? Or have we convinced ourselves that we have fished all night and caught nothing, and, that’s an end to it?

No, touched by his grace, we will hear his cry, “Do not be afraid, you will be catching people, as I once caught you, in the deep, wide net of my mercy and my love.”