

Let us pray,

You call us through your Word read and proclaimed, Holy God. May our eyes be opened and our hearts willing to follow where your Spirit leads. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the gospel of Luke, chapter 5, verses 1 through 11. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, (*jen-sir-ay*) and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, **2** he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. **3** He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught 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, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” **6** When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. **7** So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. **8** But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” **9** For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; **10** and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” **11** When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

**The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

I had a part time job as a server, or waiting tables, all throughout college. It was ultimately a job I really loved and learned a lot from, and look back very fondly on my time there - but it was also a tough job.

You were on your feet for hours carrying huge trays of drinks and food and you were always multitasking and dealing with sometimes not so nice people.

The restaurant where I worked divided up all of the tables in its dining rooms into sections, and each server got a different section. So you waited on the tables in your section.

And after the big dinner rush, as the restaurant starts to die down and less people are coming in, they would close certain sections - meaning the hosts would no longer seat people at the tables in that section. So the server for that section could go home.

And as we got closer and closer to the closing time, they would close more and more sections, until probably 20 mins from closing there would be only one section open. Nobody really wanted to be assigned that section because you'd be the last to leave.

And even though the restaurant closed at 11 PM, people could come in up until 10:59 and you'd still have to serve them, so you could be stuck much later.

And that's almost exactly what happened to me one time. I was assigned the closing section on a Saturday night. And Saturday night shifts went from 3PM to 11, so they were tough shifts.

And 10:50 rolls around and I'm utterly exhausted, and ready to go home, and a little miffed because I didn't make as much in tips as I thought I would, and in comes this family. And I know I'm stuck there for a while longer.

When I hear this story about Jesus just walking onto Simon's boat just after he finished a long night out of the water with nothing to show for it, and is cleaning his nets ready to go home - I can imagine perhaps how Simon might have felt.

Probably a lot more exhausted than I was, probably a lot more frustrated to not have caught anything, and probably even more ready to just go home.

But he doesn't. He doesn't turn Jesus away. He graciously takes Jesus out onto the water so he can teach while being a safe distance from the crowd. And then, perhaps in gratitude to Simon for taking him out on the boat, Jesus tells Simon to lower his net and they bring in so much fish, another boat has to come out and help.

This story is a story about discipleship. After seeing all these fish appear in his net, so much fish it takes two boats to carry them all, Simon Peter leaves it all. The fish, everything, behind to follow Jesus, to become a disciple.

Yes, it's a story about discipleship - but Luke tells it in a way filled with such rich symbolism and imagery. Specifically of emptiness.

The empty net Simon is washing at the beginning of the story because of a night empty of any catch. The emptiness of the boat that Jesus steps onto to escape the crowds, the emptiness of the waters.

Perhaps even the emptiness of Simon himself, drained of energy at the end of a long hard night's work.

Emptiness is likely no stranger. In poverty and food insecurity throughout the world - there is an emptiness of consistent access to food. In Unemployment - emptiness of a reliable income. Homelessness - emptiness of a place to call your own. All of these and more are more amplified by the emptiness of a life in lockdown.

Emptiness is hard to talk about. It comes with an element of shame and uncomfortableness - perhaps because there's no easy fix to any of those examples of emptiness I just mentioned.

There's even more shame and uncomfortableness if we think of emptiness within ourselves - when we feel empty of joy, love, hope. When we feel empty of any emotion.

It's a scary to look into the deep waters of emptiness and see nothing. Scary to experience. Even scarier to ask for help.

Yet, in the story of Simon, emptiness is the very vessel from which his discipleship begins. For contrasted with emptiness in this story is fullness and abundance.

The abundance of the fish, the fullness of the two boats filled to the brim with the fish, the abundance of the crowd. And right on the edge of both - the transition between the two - is Christ. It's Christ who tells Simon to go the deep water and drop his net. Simon hesitates, but does as Christ asks and then out of emptiness comes abundance.

Maybe emptiness isn't really emptiness. Not something that should be viewed negatively or with shame.

Just as the lake, where Simon Peter went out before - it still had fish, he just didn't catch any. Maybe emptiness, like deep waters, is just unexplored depths.

Depths, that, through Christ, produce abundance. When Jesus tells Simon to lower his net into the empty lake, he specifically tells Simon to lower his net in the 'deep waters'. And when he does, Simon first objects by saying they had caught nothing all night.

As Kendra A. Mohn explains "deep water" implies that there may be unexplored areas of potential beyond perceived limits of resources, knowledge, and energy."

What if our emptiness is actual just deep water? Water so deep that the limits of what the depths might bring forth are endless in Christ's eyes.

For does not this story show us that even our emptiness is a vessel for God's abundance, for God's call to discipleship?

Out of the depth, out of deep water, out of emptiness, comes abundance.

And yet, when from that abundance fish fill his boat, Simon decides to follow christ. He then leaves that all behind.

As I hear the story over and over I'm drawn to the beauty, mystery, and potential of the deep waters. But I can't understand the role of the fish.

Why does following christ mean abandoning the abundance? Leaving the fish behind - leaving everything behind?

I listened to a podcast recently that was investigating the recent labor shortage. Why workers aren't coming back to work.

And they focused on one person's story in particular: a restaurant chef. This man had worked as a restaurant chef his whole career, and before the pandemic, had never imagined doing anything different.

But when the pandemic hit he, like so many restaurant workers, got laid off. And while he was distressed at first - he quickly realized this was the first rest he'd ever had.

A rest away from the brutal hours and physical toll of being a restaurant chef. His feet stopped hurting, his back stopped hurting - in fact he had gotten so used to the pain for so long, he didn't realize how much pain he had been in until the pain stopped.

He had time to spend with his partner, to pursue hobbies, and his mental health was all around so much better.

So when his unemployment ran out, he didn't go back to the restaurant. After seeing what life could be outside of those intense and brutal conditions he couldn't go back - even though he truly loved to cook.

Instead he got a job as postal worker. Better hours, better benefits, and he's never regretted it.

He left everything behind. The only career and passion he'd ever known contained emptiness. And from the deep waters of his emptiness, the emptiness leaving it all behind created, came a new life filled with joy he didn't even know he needed.

Maybe the abundance isn't really the fish. Maybe the abundance comes from the emptiness created when we leave it all behind. When we take a leap of faith and answer the call to discipleship.

Abundance doesn't come easily - there is a cost to discipleship. To leave everything behind is no small feat.

And discipleship doesn't come when we would like, not on our own terms.

I don't think you'll be surprised to learn that the family that night in the restaurant didn't leave me a tip large enough fill two boats. I don't remember what they left at all.

But when we're exhausted and pushed to our limits - when we don't even realize how overworked we are - when we're just at the end of our shift - when we're cleaning our nets - this story asserts that this is when Christ call us to discipleship.

After we have given everything that we can give, Christ charges us to give so much more. For through christ our emptiness brings forth abundance.

Thanks be to God. Amen.