**[1]** Fifth Sunday After Epiphany (Feb 9, 2025)
Sermon Title: A Lesson in Persistence
Scripture: Luke 5:1-11
Theme: Launching into uncharted waters with courage and faith

“Launch out into the deep water and lower your nets for a catch!” (v4)

**[2]** We were coming into the harbor from a night of hard fishing. Simon Peter’s boat had gone in first; I was on the other boat, the Zebedee boat, with James and John, as we were waiting our turn to put into shore. Andrew’s boat was missing that day; we were not sure why. This was no ordinary morning, however. There was a large crowd on the shore blocking our ability to land; it did not appear to be dispersing. Rather, it seemed to be growing in size. We were extremely tired, exhausted from a long night of unrewarding work, weary from tossing out the nets and pulling them back in, over and over again. We were not in the mood for fighting off this crowd in order to pull our boats into the shore. We had more work ahead of us, to wash down the nets
and mend them and pack them so that we would be ready to get a fresh start the next evening.
Fishing was an all-night affair!

**[3]** Some in Simon Peter’s boat were cursing like sailors and pushing people away. “Cmon now, you so and so’s, Move on away! Go about your business!” We were also shouting toward the crowd at the top of our voices. “Heh, now, go on, get out of here! Go on down the road!” As we came in closer to the shore to disembark, I could see a man facing the crowd and being pushed back into the water. The crowd was impinging on his space, locking him between the land and the sea, with no way of escape. He was pushing back and forth on the people in front of him a little to create some space, and to keep from falling back into the water and getting completely soaked by the incoming waves. As this was going on, Peter reached out and pulled the man back into his boat as it was still floating back and forth in the shallow water. The man, dressed in a white robe, stood out from the crowd. He had been speaking in a loud voice, trying to be heard, trying to get attention, so that he could speak freely. When he looked at Peter, he had an uncomfortable smile on his face, almost apologetic, yet confident at the same time. He thanked Peter and sat down in the boat.

“Let me speak to them!  They will listen to me. Just put the boat out into the harbor a little way so I will have a place where I can be seen by everyone.”  Simon Peter had never seen anything like this before. Neither had I. But, in the interest of time, and a peaceful landing, we agreed. We found out later that the man’s name was Jesus of Nazareth. He was a young rabbi, a teacher, who was traveling through the countryside in Galilee, teaching about the coming reign of God, and healing the sick. The crowd had followed him to the sea’s edge. ‘Teach us, Master!’ “Please give us more of your time.” So, while some boats were on shore and other waiting to land, Jesus began to teach in the midst what seemed to be a lot of disorder.  It was amazing, as if everyone had stopped what they were doing, and sat down in place. Everyone grew quiet to listen. The boats were floating quietly; the waves were in a hushed whisper. Even the men on the boats settled down to hear him. Totally, amazing, how things got so quiet so quickly. I remember so well his message that day. He reeled in the crowd with an invisible net, inch by inch, closer and closer, reeling them in with such skill and elegance. His words were filled with grace and power.

He spoke about fishing for people, about bringing people into the fellowship of God-believers, and about forming a band of followers, disciples, to spread the word, that a new era is about to begin, an empire, not based on domination, but based on loving relationships, one with the other.

When Jesus had finished speaking, there was a natural silence as everyone considered what they had just heard. We were amazed on many different levels, physically and spiritually; it was more than we could take in. Some of the crew just needed to sit down, perhaps even fall down, and just stare for a long while in disbelief. “Pinch me, am I dreaming? Is this really happening?”

**[4]** And, then, suddenly, there was a strange noise coming from out in the sea lake, like a heavy rain beating down on the surface of the water, only there was no rain. Could it be a shoal of fish moving through the lake? Jesus was still in the boat as everyone turned to see what was happening. He quickly said, ‘Put out into the deep water and lower whatever nets you can find!’ ‘There is a great catch to be made.’ Peter was reluctant to go chasing after false hopes. The shoal would surely be gone by the time they reached it. But he smiled at Jesus and agreed to go.  Of course, as you would know it. Just when we needed them most, our casting nets (pear-shaped) (*amphiblestron*) and dragnets (*sagene*) were in grimy shambles laying on the deck, full of weeds and in need of mending.

**[5]** But, between the two boats and some of the people on the shore, together we scrounged some hunting nets and a few fishing nets and gave them to Peter as he launched his boat out into the deep water. We sat back on the deck and watched with anticipation. Better Peter go chasing than us. But then, as we looked at each other, we decided we could not let Peter go out alone. So, something clicked inside of us. Our exhausted bodies were suddenly renewed, energized by the prospect of what lay ahead. We fought the waves following Peter’s boat, rowing out away from the harbor toward the center of the sea lake.  Peter’s boat had caught up with the shoal, and they were already drawing in nets full of fish. The strain on the nets was obvious; they were about to **[6]** rip apart. Peter hurriedly motioned for us to come on in and help. As we pulled up alongside Peter’s boat, all the hands on deck began filling our boat with fish from the nets. Peter’s boat sat low in the water, and, as our boat filled up with fish, soon our boat also began to sink down. We managed to steer our full, sinking, boats back into the harbor. And, as we slowly made our way into shallow water, we began to think of the debt we owed to Jesus. If it had not been for Jesus, we would still be in the harbor, on shore, with nothing to show for our hard work, with empty nets and empty hearts, and wounded souls. We owed our great success today to Jesus. ‘You are the man!’ ‘Hip, hip, hoorah!’  But, we could see Peter from a distance, falling on his knees before Jesus; we knew what he was saying. He was speaking for all of us. ‘Go away from us, Jesus, or you will wind up catching the bad luck we have been having.’ ‘If you stay around us, we will surely sabotage your mission and your message..’ ‘Go away from us, Jesus, for we are sinful men!’ ‘You can do better than us.’ ‘I am beyond saving, Lord.’

But Jesus would have none of this. ‘You are the very people I want as my disciples!’ ‘You are the very ones God wants on God’s side.’  ‘I have great plans for you, all of you, each of you!’ ‘I have a grace beyond any sin, beyond the guilt of any sin.’ ‘We are in this boat together!’ ‘We will reach the shore together!’ ‘But I will not be going away; you will be coming with me instead.’ ‘That is, if you decide to do so, and I hope you will.’ ‘Hang around me and see what I have in store for you.

As we anchored our boats and turned them over to those on shore to unload the fish, Jesus began speaking to us: ‘How would you like to be successful like this more than one day a week?’ ‘How would you like to be spiritually profitable?’ ‘You have a choice today!’ ‘I hope you will choose me!’ Was it not Samuel who told us not to turn aside after empty treasures that cannot profit or deliver us? (1 Sam. 12:21). Choose instead the fullness of life that will fill our empty souls with meaning. It only took a brief moment; everyone from the two boats had gathered around him. Andrew joined us. Zebedee watched from a distance. No one in the circle was concerned with the huge catch that they had just brought in. They were listening intently to what their futures might be like? Should they do this, will their families be safe? Will they be provided for? Could Zebedee make a living without them?  I had no family; I was ready to say ‘yes.’ ‘I was
ready to go.’ Some gradually left the circle. The ones who remained were ready for a new life.

**[7]** From now on, you will be catching people with me.’ ‘Leave your boats, leave your nets, come, follow me!’ ‘Leave your families, your friends, your homes, your neighbors, your patrons and sponsors.’ ‘Leave what is familiar to you, and come follow me.’ We had never heard anyone like Jesus say these words before? ‘Who in the world ever does this sort of thing?’ ‘No one, I know. Yet here he was asking us to do the most radical thing ever known to the common man. When we looked into his eyes, we knew immediately what we had to do. ‘We left it all behind!’ ‘Success and failure, both!’ ‘We walked away from all of it.’ ‘Casting nets all night, every night, for a few fish, had built up our muscles over a span of time, but Jesus had asked us that day to loosen our nets, slacken our grips on the net, to haul in an enormous catch of fish, to build up our spirits.’ ‘We walked off, away from the shore, and toward the center of the land, making plans for the next day’s catch, a catch of people who needed to hear the word, God’s word, of love. We had put into the deep water to catch fish; we were now putting into the deep interior of the land to catch people. We were not scared of the deep. We were at our best in the deep. In the deep, we found life. In the deep, we found love and grace. In the deep, we found the best parts of ourselves.

Yes, I was amazed! Not the amazement that comes when someone carries a priceless Persian vase across the room, trying not to break it. It’s more like the amazement of one who grabs at what is available, sacred and beautiful, to hold on to it forever, this grace, this mercy, this amazing way of fishing. I was without words! Seized by the joy of fishing, with invisible nets of love, fishing for men and women, young and old, and all those in-between, fishing for all the colors of the rainbow, every sort and variety, all 153 known varieties of fish (John 21:11). Fishing for Jesus, fishing for the Holy Other, the God of Love, fishing with love for one another, and fishing for every single other.

We knew the characteristics of fish well, but we would have much to learn from Jesus on the characteristics of people. We knew how to survive the storms of the deep sea, how to steer around them, even how to tack, to steer, into the wind, but we would learn from Jesus how to weather the storms and find the harbors inside of our deepest needs.  We would have to rely on Jesus for our calm, our peace, to face down our own demons, and help others as well.  We would have to learn his way of praying and understanding, if we would ever be able to heal as he did. Yes, we were on the road to becoming disciples.  Amen and Amen.