

Following Jesus

Sermon for the 5th Sunday after Trinity

Luke 5:1-11



On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on Him to hear the word of God, He was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, ² and He saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³ 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. ⁴ And when He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch. ⁵ And Simon

answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." ⁶ And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. ⁷ They signaled to 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, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." ⁹ For he and all who were with him were astonished 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. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." ¹¹ And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him.

With a fishing net clamped between his teeth and squinting his eyes against the onslaught of the wind and sun, the fisherman Simon concentrated on his work. Before him lay his nets, messy and knotted in the sand. Behind the nets, the dark waves lapped monotonously on the beach. Simon's hands were raw and deeply furrowed. When he looked around occasionally, you could see the resignation of a fisherman's soul who knows how to deal with the disappointment of an empty net after a long and hard day of work. Alongside the sound of the wind and waves, Peter hears the voice of a preacher. He had previously asked Peter to anchor the boat a safe distance from the shore so that the preacher could more easily speak to the people. Simon had heard preachers before. Most were idealists who had no idea about real life. "Real life...only a fisherman could understand that..." thought Peter. Real life has to do with the fight to survive in the wind and weather. But the words of this preacher were different. He recognized this in the eyes of the listeners. There was a hopeful gleam that seemed a bit strange to him. What was it about this preacher? For a bit, Peter laid down his nets and listened himself to the man's words. He spoke in a way that anyone could understand. "I wonder if he was also a fisherman?" thought Peter. Then the preacher looked directly at him and wanted something from Peter again. He should go back into the sea and cast the nets one more time. Simon would have never thought to do something so absurd... everyone knows that you can't catch fish in broad daylight. But then he did it.... "At your

word..." he said. "Why not simply tell it like it is..." he thought. "At your word... but otherwise...a fairly ridiculous idea." And then it happened: everything that he saw in the listeners' eyes poured into his own handmade boat. Fish...but not just fish.... thousands of fish. He had never seen so many. As their slippery bodies touched his fingers and hard hands, he suddenly had an uneasy feeling. This was not normal. These were not normal fish. This was a direct sign from above. This was no ordinary preacher. Even the fish listened to him! As everything happened, he knew it, and saw it in the eyes of his colleagues. From now on everything would be different. In minutes, as they hauled the heavily laden boat onto the shore, Peter and the others knew something: this preacher was not from down here on earth. "Get away from me, Lord! I am a sinful man!" Simon stammered his inner thoughts. He couldn't quite grasp all this. His entire life, one thing had been clear to him: the pious, the good, and the holy things were very far from his fisherman's life. Yet there stood Jesus on the shore. With burning eyes that seemed to look right through Peter, came the clear message: "I want you!" And Jesus spoke further: "Don't be afraid! Follow me!" He seemed to understand everything that Peter thought. Yet he wanted the impossible. He wanted to bring together what didn't belong together. The sinner with the saint. The night with the day. Death with life. Peter went.... just like that.... left the nets, the fish, his boat. He went and followed the man who could speak like a fisherman and who brought fish into nets with his voice! But above all, the one who brought the unholy Simon together with the holy.

Let's shift our focus from Peter to ourselves, who are gathered together in this church around the same Jesus who called the fishermen Simon, James, and John. If I assume that Jesus did nothing by chance, then I must recognize that there must have been something special about the job of a fisherman. Because it was fishermen who first followed Jesus. And this wonderful story about Peter's catch of fish is likewise no accident. Jesus intentionally did what occurred at the Sea of Gennesaret and wanted to show Peter and all Christians in general very clearly that what happened to Peter at Gennesaret is an example and paradigm for the Church of every generation. What started at the Sea of Gennesaret should continue with us. Yes, just like Peter, I often face my unsuccessful efforts and do not see God in my work. How often are my dreams shattered in my short professional life? How often have you struggled days, weeks, and years on a project or for a person and end up grieving with tired eyes over the empty nets? And how often have I gotten caught up and entangled in one train of thought or another? And what each of us can recognize in our own lives can also be said about the church and mission. We stand before our empty nets and complain about our failures. Just like Peter. No matter where you go, the tune is the same. The song of the fishermen is the same for workers in God's kingdom. Dear congregation, it is no coincidence that, of all people, Jesus called the fishermen to follow Him because fishermen could understand better than anybody what failure is. And failure has always been a part of mission and the church. But Jesus doesn't let us just stand before our empty nets. Just like He called Peter, He calls us today too. At His Word, we go. Peter modeled that for us with his nets. We still do that today. Sometimes even when the entire plan is illogical and makes absolutely no sense. At His Word! Through the calling of the disciple Peter, Jesus very clearly shows us what's important. Peter, against all normal fishermen knowledge must leave everything and work according to Jesus' Word. Even today, we should sometimes leave the clever fisherman knowledge we have aside and let Jesus have His say instead. In a time when fewer and fewer people believe in God, you can hear this fisherman knowledge again: "Is it still worth it? Shouldn't we just stay together and keep what we have to ourselves?" I sometimes hear Christians say this. A trend occurs that goes in the wrong direction from both sides. People remove themselves from the church. And the few Christians that are left in the church remove themselves from the people who don't want to be there. But it should be the other way

around! Even as others withdraw, we should approach people and find a way to speak that everyone will understand. We should go out! We should break out of our pile of nets in which we were entangled and go into the world...we should do that at His Word.... And not because we decided to do that or because we want to improve our church treasury or to improve our reputation in the community. No, only because Jesus sends us. There is no other reason. As Peter stood before Jesus, he suddenly didn't care about the fish in the boat. He only saw Jesus. But at the same time, he was afraid. Jesus was so different from him. "I am a sinful man" Peter said. The two of us.... we don't belong together. It's like water and fire. But Jesus still wanted Peter. When Peter took those first steps in following Jesus, he knew: This Jesus would never let him go. He would follow in His footsteps, would follow Him. And yet he still had so much to learn. "Get away from me, Lord!" he says by the boat... Much later, Peter said something very similar: "You shall never wash my feet!" Then Jesus had to be very strict. "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." It seems to me Peter always had the problem that he couldn't believe that Jesus wanted to come to him, a sinful person. Isn't that the basic problem we all have as humans? God comes to us through Jesus and we just can't believe it: "Should God really come to us?" Many people think this and think that God is just too far away and couldn't stand to be around sinful people. It seems to me that we must always go through Peter's school again and again. Yes! Jesus comes to you and he wants to use you. Just as you are! Jesus uses people in His service who aren't actually qualified. And just like Peter, we cry out: "Lord, get away from me!" "I am with you always" Jesus said to disciples after He gave them the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18). And so it goes on in the history of the Church. Jesus breaks apart the distance between us and him. He comes to us even when we are sinful and have made many mistakes. He also calls ordinary people like Peter, like James and like John. Like one of us. When Peter walked in Jesus' footsteps, he also had to learn all this. He had to learn above all that Jesus would stand by him despite his sin. After falling away and denying Jesus three times, Jesus again said to Peter: "Feed my lambs!" Three times Jesus said that to Peter. Yes, he wouldn't have understood otherwise. Peter had to really know that Jesus is with him. I think we all must learn this again and again from Jesus. I also continually grieve over the fact that my work and my actions are so human and weak. Sometimes I long for Jesus to simply come stand before me and give me a miracle, like He did for Peter in the fishing boats. That is also human. And perhaps Jesus does give us a little sunbeam every now and then.... A miracle in our world! Through it, He wants to tell us: "Don't be afraid! I am here. I stand by you." And in the times when we can't see Jesus, I know exactly what to do. I will do what Peter showed us. Nothing other than following Jesus' Word. Amen.