

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour Lutheran Church
February 6, 2022
Epiphany 5

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, there is something in today's gospel reading that sticks out like a sore thumb, at least it sticks out for me.

Maybe it sticks out for you, too.

In today's gospel reading, personally I can't seem to get beyond Simon Peter's words, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

PAUSE

Now, the gospel takes place by beside the lake of Gennesaret, which is another name for the Sea of Galilee, that large fresh water body in northern Israel.

There by the lake of Gennesaret Jesus gets into Simon's boat.

Jesus gets into Simon's boat because the enormous crowd who has been following Jesus...

This enormous crowd of people, according to the text, is pressing in on Jesus.

The crowd is so overwhelming Jesus that his only recourse is get into a boat and put out into the lake.

And from there within the boat, Jesus sits down, which is how rabbis would teach.

Jesus sits down in the boat and he begins to teach.

Now, as you may have heard me mention in the past, the image of the boat was used in the early church as a symbol of the church.

So, in essence, we are to understand from this gospel reading that Jesus is the one whose word is proclaimed in the church, and which teaches us God's will.

But then, after Jesus has finished teaching from his sitting position in the boat...

After Jesus is done teaching, he tells Simon to put out into deeper water and to cast down his nets into the water.

And after a little hemming and hawing, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.”

After a little hemming and hawing, Simon does as Jesus says, casting down his nets.

And to Simon’s great surprise, he suddenly finds that he has caught so many fish, that his nets are beginning to come apart.

Simon has indeed caught so many fish that he has to call over his partners in the other boat to come and help bring in this great catch.

And again, the catch of fish into the boat is a symbol of what the church is to be about—bringing in new believers.

PAUSE

Now, I was tempted to speak about the second boat, that other boat in the story.

I was tempted to speak about how it was necessary for Simon Peter to call over to his partners to help bring in this great catch.

I was tempted to focus on this other boat and to talk about the importance of partnering in the present day with other boats, with other churches, as we have been doing with Good Shepherd Lutheran Church with respect to Family Promise...

We have been partnering with our sisters and brothers in Christ at Good Shepherd to extend God’s grace to families in need.

Similarly, I was also tempted to go into our partnership with Epiphany as we have been discerning ways to serve the gospel together.

Similarly, I was also tempted to speak about our partnership with the Tabernacle Baptist Church whereby we have been discussing not only justice issues but have been brainstorming ways that we can draw our congregations into a closer relationship.

I was tempted to talk about all these other boats out there on the water with whom we have been partnering.

But, that topic will have to wait for another sermon.

For I just couldn’t get beyond Simon Peter’s words.

For when Simon sees the great abundance of fish that have miraculously appeared simply by Jesus telling Simon to let down his nets...

When Simon sees the great catch of fish, he says to Jesus...

“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

And these words struck me as quite profound.

“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

PAUSE

Now, I imagine that these are the words of a man who suddenly realizes that he is in the very presence of God.

These are the words of a man who is utterly humbled to be in the presence of the Divine.

These are the words of a man who is even ashamed of who he is, unworthy even to stand before the Almighty.

Indeed, would any of us feel any differently if God were suddenly standing here in our presence?

“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful woman.”

PAUSE

But here is the “catch,” pun intended.

Here is the irony in this passage.

It is good to be a sinner. It is good to be a sinner.

Now, I am not saying that we should delight in sinning.

No, I am not saying that we should go around finding ways in which we can be sinful.

No, I am not saying that we should embrace lying, engage in stealing, and indulge in all kinds of wrongdoing.

No, this is not what I am saying at all.

But, nonetheless, it is good to be sinner.

Why? Because it is the sinners for whom Jesus was sent into the world.

It is the sinners for whom Jesus was sent into the world.

And this is an important theme for Luke in his gospel.

It is good to be a sinner.

Indeed, only little further along in this chapter 5 of Luke's gospel Jesus says, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance."

It is good to be a sinner, because it is to such as these that Jesus has come to call.

Let me see if I can put it another way.

Let me see if Martin Luther's explanation might give us a greater appreciation of what the Gospel of Luke is saying.

You see, Martin Luther said it this way.

The church, this building, this institution, is a *krankenhaus*, a sick house, or more accurately translated from the German, the church is a "hospital."

The church is a hospital, but not for physical ailments.

If we suddenly were not feeling well, we would NOT come here to church for medical help.

If we were sick, or injured, suffering some ailment, we wouldn't come here.

We would go to the Community General Hospital, or to the Hershey Medical Center, or some urgent care facility to find treatment.

We wouldn't come here.

But, to the contrary, when we are suffering spiritual infirmities, when we are burdened with a sin-sick soul, when we are ailing from some brokenness of spirit, it is most appropriate to find our way here.

We come to the church because we are sinners.

That is why after all we begin our worship with the Order of Confession and Forgiveness.

We begin our time together in worship by acknowledging our sinfulness.

We can't get around it.

Because if we are truly honest, each and every last one of us must admit that he or she is sinful.

One reading of the Order of Confession and Forgiveness says, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

It is good to be a sinner. It is good to admit that we are sinful.

Because then Jesus comes to heal us.

PAUSE

But more often than not, we as people are prideful.

We don't like to admit our sin, perhaps because it reveals some weakness in ourselves, and we don't like to think of ourselves as weak or broken.

Or, we don't like to admit our sin, because we are too ashamed and are afraid of how others will respond, that we will be judged or made to feel ashamed.

No, we don't like to admit our sin.

PAUSE

But, sometimes people will go to the other extreme and will torture themselves before God attempting to name any and every sin they can think of, not wanting to leave any sin unaccounted for.

Sometimes we beat ourselves up because we feel so burdened by our sin.

But hopefully we can be gentle on ourselves, for we know that Jesus is our healer and that Jesus loves the sinner.

Jesus loves us in spite of who we are as sinners.

PAUSE

It is actually quite interesting that because Jesus loved sinners in his earthly ministry, Jesus earned quite a reputation.

In fact, in chapter 7 of Luke's gospel, Jesus acknowledges the rumors that are flying around about him.

Jesus says the people are saying of the Son of Man, that he has a demon, that he eats and drinks without restraint, that he is a glutton and a drunkard, that he is a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

The image of Jesus is something of a reveler.

Jesus went to a wedding at Cana and changed an abundance of water into wine.

Jesus apparently didn't practice moderation or fast when it came to food and drink.

He socialized with others, and he met people where they were.

He was a friend to sinners.

But thank God, Jesus was and is a friend to sinners.

It is a good to be a sinner. Again, that doesn't mean we are to embrace sin, but it is good to acknowledge our sinfulness because Jesus meets us and bring forgiveness and healing.

Yes, this image of Jesus as one who met people where they were, that he loved to be with the sinner, is a somewhat radical perspective on who Jesus was and what he was about.

I think about that line from Billy Joel's song, "Only the Good Die Young."

At one point in the lyrics, Joel says, "I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints. The sinners are much more fun."

To a large extent, this seems to echo well with whom Jesus was and what he was about in his earthly ministry.

Jesus was more partial to the sinners. He sought them out, more so than the righteous apparently.

But, it wasn't just so he could party with the sinners.

No, it was because Jesus meet us people where they are.

Jesus goes to where there is need of healing.

And so, Jesus meets us here in this place, in this krankenhaus, in this spiritual hospital.

Jesus meets us here and Jesus brings forgiveness and healing even today.

PAUSE

So, like I said, I couldn't help but get stuck on the words of Simon Peter, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

But we, you and I, who are sinful people...we don't want Jesus to go away from us.

It is good to be a sinner. We acknowledge our sin.

And in so doing, we know Jesus comes to us.

Indeed, Jesus wants to come to us, to meet us where we are.

And we want Jesus to come to us, to heal us, to forgive us, to make us whole.

This is the meeting place. Here in this place we experience healing. Thanks be to God. Amen.