



# First United Church of Oak Park

## What Happened to All the Fish?

Luke 5:1-11

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Jesus was teaching to a big crowd of people. Nothing unusual in that, Jesus' fame was spreading throughout Galilee even very early on in his ministry. However, as our passage today begins, Jesus is really just a one-man show. He is a solitary figure traveling from place to place; there are no Disciples yet. Until this day, anyway, where he is on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The locals called it Lake Genessaret because it is a lake, fresh-water and filled with a great deal of fish. There were towns all around the lake with a mixture of all sorts of people, Jews and Gentiles, foreigners as well as locals, traders there to purchase a kind of fish sauce that was the basic table condiment for every meal, the table salt of its day. It was an interesting place, Lake Genessaret, busy, full of activity.

And it is that varied and diverse community that is gathered to hear Jesus teach. They are so eager, in fact, that they are pressing in on him too closely, and he needed some space just so that everyone could hear. So he asks a nearby fisherman, Simon (Peter we call him now), but at that moment he was just some guy, he asks him to row him out into the water a bit, to get some distance. Now Peter hadn't even been there to listen to Jesus, he had been fishing. He was cleaning and mending and preparing to dry and fold his fishing nets, which was just a daily chore you needed to do at the end of work. But Peter agreed and rowed Jesus out a ways into the shallows of the lake, and Jesus taught the crowd for a while.

When he was finished, Jesus turned to Peter and told him to row out from the shallows, out into the deep water, and there to let his nets down into the lake. Now Peter objects, first because it's inconvenient--he would have to begin all over again with his end of day chores—cleaning, drying, folding the nets. But second, Peter says, it would be pointless. They had fished all night and caught nothing. Not one fish. Peter and his partners James and John had done their utmost and it had been fruitless.

But Jesus insists, let down your nets, so perhaps reluctantly, Peter lowers the net into the lake and when he begins to pull it back up he feels...he feels...Fish, so many fish he can barely lift them. In my imagination, Jesus offers to help with a little smile in his eye—you've got something, do you?—Jesus is a young man, strong with arms of a manual laborer, which he was. They haul in the nets and they are so filled with every kind of fish there was in the lake—tilapia and sardines and catfish—so many the boat is beginning to capsize. So Peter calls for his partners, James and John, to row out in their boat to help, too. And all four of them haul in the nets, enough to fill both boats up completely with fish. These are not small fishing boats, each one could easily hold 1,000 pounds of fish. They rowed back to shore with perhaps a literal ton of fish, perhaps 2,000 pounds of fish. Back to this incredulous crowd who must be wondering, what is happening here?

And what happens next is well known. Peter and James and John become the very first Disciples of Jesus. That inimitable line “from now on you will be fishing for people.”

They do, these three fishermen, leave everything behind—their boats, their nets, their businesses. When Jesus walks away from the shore they leave everything behind and never come back. Thus begins the story of the Disciples. But that leaves me with one burning question.

What happened to all the fish?

Remember, this is a lot of fish, a ton of fish quite literally. And the crowd who watched this miraculous catch of fish be brought in to shore, they also watched the owners of those fish just walk off never to return. What happened to all the fish? Well, the crowd would have divided up the miraculous catch of fish and taken them home to eat them or to market to sell them or to the fish sauce makers to make fish sauce. They knew the value of fish, they knew what to do with a ton of fish. The story of the call of the first Disciples, here, is also a kind of sneaky second story, too. It's the story of miraculously feeding a multitude. The fishermen who hadn't caught a fish all night instead having enough to feed the whole town, and for free.

The story of call of the first Disciples is also a story about a whole community being blessed in ordinary, embodied, wonderful ways. The story of call of the first Disciples is also a story about a whole community being blessed in ordinary, embodied, wonderful ways. It's a blessing for the whole community; that's what Christian discipleship is like.

I love this passage, the story of the call of the first Disciples. Because I see two crucial lessons that will still define discipleship to this day. The first is that discipleship is about following Jesus as who you are, with the person you are, the life you do lead, the skills you do have. Peter and James and John are fishermen; what does Jesus tell them? From now you'll be fishing for people. Discipleship is about following Jesus as who you are, turning all of yourself to the service of the Way of Jesus.

The second lesson is more of a test or a verification of the first. Okay, so I've turned my whole self over toward the way of Christ, how do I know that it's...you know...working? How do I know if I'm doing it right? You'll know when what you do leads to overflowing blessings, blessings for the whole community. This might feel daunting. How am I supposed to do something that blesses the whole community? I can barely keep my own household together—I've been fishing all night, not one fish.

It's easier than it seems. And it can sneak up on you, the good that you can do for the whole community. In the face of neighbors struggling to afford food, it can be volunteering just a few hours a month at the food pantry. And all of a sudden, thousands of families are supported each month by the food pantry. In the face of a world driven to the corners of isolation, it can be writing PAL notes a few weeks out of the year. And all of a sudden, people who are mourning have their prayers lifted up across the country, people recovering from surgery have casseroles dropped off at their doors, the heartbroken know they are not alone. In a nation struggling with youth depression and mental health crises compounded by the pandemic, it can be serving as a Friend in Faith or a FUJI or FUSH advisor or a Sunday School teacher. And all of a sudden, the young people of Oak Park see that there is a whole community that loves them and cares what happens to them, that knows their worth isn't measured by GPA and that who they are is a gift.

Christian discipleship, this is what we are doing here at church. And all of this, what we are doing, it matters deeply to the whole community. When you support the work of the church, when you join in to the work of the church, when you set off on the path of

discipleship, it is about bringing who you are, who you really are, and becoming a blessing to the whole community.

The story of the calling of the first Disciples. A remarkable story, but wait until you hear what happened to all the fish.