

**Epiphany 5C
Luke 5:1-11
February 6, 2010**

Many of you remember that for the past three years, on this particular Sunday in Epiphany, when we hear once again the call of Jesus to the fishermen, that I have told a fish joke. Not any fish joke, but one from the Upper Peninsula, where all my extended family resides, a joke featuring those crazy Yoopers, Eino and Toivo.

I started off my very first Sunday at All Saints, three years ago, with an Eino and Toivo fish joke. It will break the ice, I thought, relieve the nervousness. And it did. So the next year, this lesson came around in Matthew's gospel, and I told another one. Last year, it was Mark's version of the story, and I told another one.

Three years later, the lectionary cycle has come around to Luke again. I had planned to just drop the whole Yooper fish joke thing this year and move on. But then one of my cousins in the UP told me this one, and well ... I just HAD to share.

So Toivo is out fishin' on a little lake near Negaunee. And he rows his boat out to da middle of da lake, lights a stick of dynamite, and drops it in da water. BOOM! Dere's a big explosion, and t'ousands of fish come bobbin' to da surface. So Toivo takes out his net and starts scoopin' dem into da boat. Well, dere's a game warden from da DNR on da shore, see, and he jumps in his boat and fires up da motor and roars up alongside-a Toivo's boat. And he starts yellin' "You can't fish like that! It's against the law! I'm taking you in!"

So Toivo, he just lights anodder stick of dynamite. And he tosses it into da game warden's lap. "Well," Toivo says, "you gonna just sit dere, or are you gonna start fishin'?"

Are you going to just sit there, or are you going to start fishing? That's the choice Jesus offers Simon and James and John in this morning's lesson. When Jesus comes upon them, they're just sitting. They are sitting on the same little spit of shoreline, next to the same battered boats, picking over the same nets, as they do every morning.

They know the drill. You go out at night, when the fish are active. You lower your nets. If the fish luck is with you, you haul in enough to pay for your very expensive, Roman Empire issued fishing license, which every fisherman had to have to fish on the Sea of Galilee, or the Lake of Gennesaret, as Luke calls it. And maybe, if the fish luck is really with you, your catch is large enough to pay for your license, and also to take to market, where if business is good, you earn enough to feed your family for another day.

It was a hard life, being a fisherman in first-century Galilee. It was probably close to subsistence level living. But it was what they knew. It was what they could do. It was what their fathers did, and their fathers before them, and their fathers before them. There was unpredictability to it, sure. But nothing really in the way of novelty.

Then Jesus appeared, sat down in Simon's boat, and everything changed. It was like a bomb went off in the middle of Simon's ordinary, every day life. Fish everywhere! Bursting the nets, swamping the boats, flapping, splashing, jumping, stinking up the place with the un-looked for, unmerited bounty of God.

God exploded into Simon's life that morning. And as he cowered there, among the fish, in terror, Jesus stretched out a hand toward him. "Don't be afraid," the Master said. Don't be afraid. Isn't that always the first thing anyone says when God explodes into someone's life? "Don't be afraid. From now on you will be catching people."

Or as Toivo might say, "You gonna sit there, or are you gonna start fishin'?"

I have spent this week mourning the loss of two people dear to me who knew what it meant to stop sittin' and start fishin'. The first was a friend to a number of us here at All Saints ... Roger Matthews, the founder of Haiti Outreach Mission. Roger, who died two weeks ago today, had retired from marketing jobs in the auto industry when he married his wife Dominique, a pediatrician born in Haiti. On their honeymoon, they traveled to meet her family in Haiti, and when Roger saw all the poverty, he said, "We can do something here." So they founded HOM, a little mom-and-pop charity that grew from mobile medical clinics operating under tarps in the backcountry to a full-time medical clinic in Mirebalais, staffed by a physician and a dentist. HOM brought a computer lab and a library to the parish school, founded an orphanage for more than 30 children, and started a water purification system to create jobs and clean water for the children there.

Roger also did relief work in Nigeria, ferrying medical supplies, even ambulances, into the back country. He did all of this because as he grew up from childhood in the Episcopal church, Jesus got a hold of him. He believed it was his duty and delight as a child of God to help other children of God. He cast a wide net, day after day, year after year, to try to haul the last and the least of God's children out of the depths and onto a safer shore.

But that is not the only way to catch people. This week I learned that one of the matriarchs of my last church in Gaithersburg, Maryland – Gloria Carney – had died. Gloria was a quiet woman, and if you met her in passing, you might think she was just another sweet little old church lady. But Gloria too had been caught by Jesus, and in her own quiet way, she too began catching people.

Gloria and her husband owned a small drugstore, right on the corner of Main Street, in Gaithersburg's picturesque downtown. From that vantage point, she saw a lot. And one of the things she saw was a growing number of homeless men wandering the streets, men with alcohol and drug problems, mostly, men who needed more attention than they could get in the bigger shelters.

Gloria convinced the city to open a small shelter for these men, right on the town square, next to the exquisitely restored Victorian city hall. Not everyone in the town liked this project of hers ... why put drunken bums right there in the middle of town, they said. Why not send them back to DC, they said. Gloria just pressed on, because she knew it was the right thing to do, and when she knew something was the right thing to do, you could not stop her for love or money. Gloria's gone now. That shelter is still there, stretching a safety net for men with barely a last gasp of hope, giving them an opportunity for a new life.

That's what happens, when Jesus comes looking for you, when he sits in your boat, when he shows you just exactly what he's made of. It changes everything. It changes everyone -- everyone who has eyes to see and ears to hear and noses to smell the unimagined bounty of God, flapping and bouncing at your feet like so many miraculous fish.

Sometimes it leads you far from home ... I'm sure Roger Matthews never expected to be building a medical clinic and an orphanage on Haiti's Central Plateau. Sometimes it wakes you up to the opportunities right outside your window ... like when Gloria Carney watched the homeless men wander past her drugstore and realized that things could be different for them.

You just don't know. But what I do know is this: week after week, Jesus drops into our outstretched palms like a stick of dynamite -- the unimaginable power and mystery of God packed into a bit of bread or a sliver of a wafer. And the very Body of Christ lies there for a moment in your hand or in mine.

And again, as it happens over and over, week after week, Jesus challenges us. What are we going to do about it, now that God has come so close, sat down in our very boat, become flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone in this sacrament of Holy Communion. What are we going to do about it?

Are we gonna sit here?

Or are we gonna start fishin'?