

Wicked Tilapia

Luke 5:1-11

May 12, 2024

Say fish. A woman was walking along stony Creek carrying 6 huge trout in a bucket. A game warden came up and asked to see her fishing license. "I don't have one," she said. "You know it's illegal to fish without a license!" said the warden. "I wasn't fishing, officer. These trout are my pets. They like a little exercise, so when the weather's nice, I take them out and let them swim around. Once they're done, I whistle and they jump back into my bucket and we head home." The officer wasn't buying it, so the woman said, "You don't believe me? Watch this!" She throws the fish into the water. The warden waits for a minute then says, "Alright, now whistle and make your fish jump back into the bucket." She looks at him and asked, "What fish?" Any of you watch Wicked Tuna? Major league fishing? Deadliest Catch. There's a ton of fishing shows on TV Today. How would you like to fish for a living? Be hard, but I could get used to it. Today, we're going to talk about that so please open your Bibles to Luke 5.

Our theme this year is the great what? Great commission! Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. We return today to this theme and will be looking at one of the stories many of us learned in Sunday School years ago. Maybe you learned the song, I will make you fishers of men---always one of the favorites for the Little Ducklings. We like to sing it, but how willing are we to allow Him to make us fishers of men. Let's take a fresh look at this story today. If you are able please stand as we read it from Luke 5:1-11 One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God, 2 he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. 3 He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

This is one of Jesus' most well-known stories and is found in 3 of the 4 gospels. Luke's version is the longest and provides the most information about Jesus at the Lake of Gennesaret. Say Gennesaret. That is from a Hebrew word meaning harp because this body of water is shaped roughly like a harp. It is usually called the Sea of Galilee or even Sea of Tiberius. It's about 6 miles wide at its widest point and it's about 14 miles long. It's a beautiful body of water and we were privileged to sail on her when we were in Israel and I hope to do so again. It is not a sea at all but technically a freshwater lake, but it is the lowest lake in the world at 700' below sea level. The deepest point is 141 feet. Its average depth is 84'. It's fed by the Jordan River coming in at the top and then the Jordan flows out again at the bottom where we did baptisms. Because of the constant flow of freshwater, it has several species of fish of which tilapia, carp, and sardines are the most valuable. Thus the sermon title, Wicked Tilapia.

One specie of tilapia is known as St. Peter's fish and we got to eat some when we were there. Most were not a fan of the heads. In Jesus day, many could not afford meat, but fish was a cheaper protein which created a large fishing industry around the lake. These fish would be caught and either dried and salted or made into fish sauce to be shipped far and wide. No less than 30 fishing towns surrounded the lake in Jesus' day, one of which was called Bethsaida which means house of fish. Imagine how that smelled. When we visited Magdala, we saw ancient stone raceways where fish were stored alive before being salted and shipped out. The largest fishing town was Capernaum where Peter lived and to which Jesus had also now moved. Capernaum had a population of about 1500 people which was 3-4 times bigger than Jesus' hometown of Nazareth.

Most fishing was done from boats. Say boat. We also saw the Jesus Boat which was dug out of the mud on the edge of the shore of the Sea of Galilee in 1986. It was a Tracker ☺. It dated to 40BC and was almost certainly in use while Jesus was there. Although it could have been the actual boat Jesus taught in that day, there were many others just like it for it was a very typical fishing boat for the time. It was about as long as a UPS truck, at 26.5, 7.5 feet wide, and 4.5 feet deep. The planks were made of cedar, the ribs of oak, and ten other types of wood had been used for repairs over the years. It had a single mast with a square sail and could hold about a ton of fish. Believe it or not, they did not find an outboard Evinrude nor even a trolling motor anywhere close by.

Fishing was usually done with nets, not poles but some fishhooks have been found, eagle claw size 3. There were two main types of nets. The most common for shallow water around the edge of the lake was bell shaped and about 18-27 feet in diameter with lead weights around the bottom. It would sink over the fish and the angler would pull on a rope to close the bottom and then reel them in. Larger dragnets were used for deeper water and they could hold many fish but tore more easily. Because the fish went to deep water during the day to avoid the heat, many fished at night, as Peter tells Jesus they had just done.

We learn from the other gospels that Peter's brother Andrew was also there. Family businesses were common and this was a business. They were **commercial** fisherman, not hobbyists. They weren't out there to get wall hangers and bragging rights. They were there to make money and put food on their tables. If you didn't catch anything, you didn't pay your bills. These men were like the watermen around the Chesapeake Bay or those on Wicked Tuna or Deadliest Catch.

As this passage begins, Jesus is preaching to a crowd near the shore. There was a cove near Capernaum that could allow one's voice to carry and speak to many people. Because it was common to sit while teaching and because of the crowd, Jesus found it easier to sit in a boat a little ways out in the water and speak to those on

shore. (s) According to John 1, Peter and Andrew had already met Jesus but were not yet disciples although John tells us that Andrew had followed John the Baptist. After a fruitless night of fishing, they were washing their nets getting ready for tonight's trip. That's when Jesus appropriates Peter's boat to use as his pulpit. Someone said once I could preach behind a hog trough and as Paul said 1 Cor 9, I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" Jesus was preaching the Word of God from a smelly fishing boat!

After the closing hymn, it was time to reimburse the owner for the use of his boat. Vs. 4, ...He said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." Try again. Vs 5 Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because **you** say so, I will let down the nets." To these fishermen, it's a crazy request. We can imagine Peter thinking, "Rabbi, you know the Scriptures, we know fish. You stick to preaching and we'll stick to fishing. But, to make you happy, to humor you, we'll do it."

Vs 6 When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. 7 So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. Oh my goodness! Who'd a thunk? No lures, wrong time of day, not even the normal honey hole. Boom! So many fish the nets were tearing and both boats were sinking. Over two tons of fish. The most fish at one time they'd probably ever caught. Perhaps more than they had caught in the last 2-3 months combined.

When Jesus tells you to do something, do it. Regardless of how crazy it sounds, how ridiculous it seems, how odd, just do it. Like when He says, "Wash one another's feet." Or "Love your enemies." Or "forgive and you'll be forgiven." Or "Trust me completely." Or a thousand other of His hard sayings. And when we do, we discover the same blessing that Peter and Andrew discovered that day, that God does exceedingly abundantly beyond all we can ask or imagine. Way more than we can even handle. Like them, our boats aren't big enough! Imagine if Peter had followed his conventional wisdom and refused to do it. Imagine if he had never obeyed. Imagine if he'd gotten stubborn and said, "No way, Jesus! I just got these nets clean and dry and now you want me to throw em in again? Sounds like something a carpenter would say." Oh I'm glad he did and I'll be he was too!

So what have you been resisting? Has God been moving in your heart calling you to Christian service? To teach SS? To give a special gift to someone in need? To lead a youth group? To witness to your neighbor? As Nike puts it, "Just do it!" And then watch and see what God just does in return. Read your Bible, start a prayer group, lead a service project. My guess is you already know what it is, you just haven't surrendered. There's no time, it's not the right time, they don't want to hear it, I don't know what to say, etc. Let's learn from Peter and just obey!

So how did Peter react to this obvious miracle? Vs 8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" 9 For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, 10 and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. What did Peter do? He hit the dirt! He dropped in his tracks. He didn't even stop to take a selfie with all those fish. He knew he was in the presence of God Himself and he knew he didn't belong there. A tsunami of humility washed over him and took him to his knees begging Jesus to leave him.

Have you ever seen God do a miracle? Have you ever witnessed a marvel that was obviously God? A miraculous healing, an incredible answer to prayer? An undeserved blessing of great magnitude? If so, how'd you respond? At the very least, I hope we said thanks. But too often we take Jesus for granted. We presume on His mercy. We witness a miracle and get up and go off like nothing ever happened. But Peter sets an example for all of us. May we drop to our knees before the God of the universe in total humility. Perhaps we don't do that for one of two reasons. Either we don't know how holy and powerful Jesus really is or we don't know how sinful and evil we really are. For when we grasp both of those, we'll follow Peter into humble submission and hit our knees before Him.

But look at Jesus' response, "Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid." When you bow before Jesus, He will raise you up. The fear of the Lord is the **beginning** of wisdom. It's not the end of it, but until we realize who Jesus really is, we can never receive His salvation nor His mercy. Once we realize we **should** fear Him, Jesus then says, "Don't be afraid." Some of **us** need to hit the dirt today like Peter in humble repentance. And some have and now need to hear Jesus' words of assurance, "Don't be afraid. Rise up! I got plans for you!"

We don't have to stay on our faces groveling in the dirt. Let Jesus raise you up and then hear what He says next, "From now on you will catch men." As Matthew and Mark put it, "Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men." It was both an invitation and a command. They would have to decide. Most rabbis at that time waited for their disciples to choose them. Only the most radical chose their own disciples. Jesus couldn't take that chance. He intentionally chose those whom He knew would stay with Him and pay attention to His teachings over the next three years and then faithfully carry out His mission after His resurrection, and ascension. Imagine if He had left all that to chance, or even worse to human will. Obviously **these** four would never have chosen Him since they were already gainfully employed. This would mean a pay cut and create a serious crisis for their family fishing businesses. He chose them and tells them to come. What will they do standing there in those boats with nets in their hands and fish flopping all around their feet?

Vs 11 So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him. Fishing was hard and dangerous work but being Jesus' disciples would be even harder and more dangerous. You think tilapia are wicked? Try human beings. They didn't know it at the time, but this would end up costing them their friends, their reputations, their future ambitions, and their very lives. But in doing so, they would change the world and touch eternity. They would end up getting a foundation of the heavenly city named after them. Fishing required lots of insight, wisdom, strategy, and faith. It demanded patience and often produced frustration. Sounds like ministry to me. Although they weren't college graduates or professional speakers, fishing was the perfect preparation for what they would do the rest of their lives.

Jesus can use anyone and everyone and He's called every one of us to His fishing business. Whatever **your** background, skills, training, or aptitude is, He can repurpose it incredible ways to change lives and impact eternity. The problem is, some of us don't want to walk away from our boat full of fish. Say everything. What was the everything they left? Their boats, their nets, their family businesses, oh, and the largest catch of fish they had ever made. Thousands of dollars in today's money, perhaps tens of thousands. They left it all on the beach and followed Jesus. It was hard to leave teaching to pastor fulltime. Things were going well at Central, we were winning contests and students were graduating and becoming successful. Our FFA Chapter was named best in the state several years in a row. My boat was chock full of fish but it was starting to sink. Not everyone is called to set apart ministry but every believer is called to fulltime evangelism, fishing for men. Of serving Jesus no matter what your position is or what your job involves. We all need to be fishing for men, not for sport or recreation, but for eternity. Not as a taxidermist to mount dead ones, but as a catcher of live ones!

In another passage, Jesus spoke about how the fields being white unto harvest. In fishing terms, the lake is fully stocked, overflowing with trophy large-mouths, rainbows, and muskies. And if we don't fish em out, they're all doomed to eternal death. Charles Spurgeon once said, "You men and women that sit before me, you are by the shore of a great sea of human life swarming with the souls of men. You live in the midst of millions; but if you will follow Jesus, and be faithful and true to Him, and do what He bids you, He will make you fishers of men."

Next week, God willing, we're going to talk about some fishing methods. Some concrete ways to cast a net and reel one in for Jesus. Where to fish, what bait to use, what species to fish for. But today we need to decide if we even want to be in Jesus' boat? Are you willing to leave some things behind? Perhaps it's worldly hobbies or friendships. Perhaps it's a family tradition or a habit that doesn't honor God and interferes with His kingdom. Do what those four did, leave everything behind and follow Jesus to become a fisher of men!