

**Fresh Catch**  
**Luke 5:1-11**  
**Rev. Michael D. Kirby**  
**Northminster Presbyterian Church**

It was a dream she could hardly have imagined. When Alice heard of the results of the Presidential election she felt she had to do something. Not enough progress had been made before and she felt that despite her relative youth, she needed to do something big. Many around her in the movement said her strategy was wrong, they should concentrate on local opportunities for progress, and that the national level was just too fraught so shortly after the election.

But Alice was driven on by a faith born in the Quaker meetings her family attended more than weekly. Her faith gave her a calling and like Simon Peter hearing Jesus' bizarre instructions, she felt compelled by God to do this thing.

And so she began contacting supporters, using every part of emerging media she could think of to get the word out, trying to cast her net as wide as possible so that something could be done, something big in connection with the upcoming inauguration.

And so they gathered with their signs and a few celebrities. And they made their case in a rally and began to march. They didn't expect things to change overnight, but Alice hoped this would be a new beginning for a movement that had been struggling of late. And so they chanted and marched and prayed that people would listen.

Oh, I probably should have mentioned. I'm not talking about yesterday. I'm talking about that march associated with another inauguration, the one that took place in 1913 for Woodrow Wilson. The march Alice organized was for Women's Rights, especially, the right to vote. Alice Paul's parents and their church didn't really approve of her social action, but they were the source of her conviction. The faith they taught her told her to defy the national leaders in the suffragist movement of the day who said winning the vote state by state was more prudent.

But for Alice, responding to her calling, hearing deep in her soul that equality before God meant the only way our society could be whole and holy was if women had the same rights as men. It inspired her — despite the fatigue of a movement that had begun more than 55 years before at Seneca Falls — to head back out into deep waters and cast the nets again.

Their march was not treated as kindly as those we saw on television and the internet yesterday. Their way was blocked by angry men — police would not protect them. Famously, regiments from nearby Maryland were the only ones who stepped up for them, creating a path for their march to continue. Also famously, local Boy Scouts sprang into action to assist the wounded — women and men who had been attacked by the angry mob.

Alice Paul's leadership and the work of thousands of other men and women, many acting on their religious convictions, led to the adoption of the 19th Amendment in August of 1920.

In today's text, on a day early in Jesus' public ministry, he is doing what he always did, trying to teach and preach to the crowds who began to follow him when they learned of how he had helped others, how he was proclaiming a new message of deliverance. It was a message that those living under Rome and Jerusalem's oppressive boot were interested in hearing.

Simon, who Jesus will later name Simon Peter, the rock on which the church will be built, has heard of this man, of course. Luke has already told us that one of the people healed was Simon's mother-in-law. But still, Simon Peter is not one of the throng of followers. He's a fisherman, and on this day, a weary fisherman.

The Sea of Galilee, sometimes called the Lake of Gennesaret as in today's passage, was the source of much of the protein and fat in the diets of the people of that region. But fishermen were not revered. In fact, they were considered to be among the most unsavory professions. They fished with nets not unlike the one on the cover of today's bulletin, except they did it at night, not during the day when the heat drove the fish into deep water. They would spend all night casing their nets and hauling in what they could get. Early in the morning, they would haul in their catch and once on shore, kill the fish to prepare them for smoking or selling and then prepare their nets for the next night. It was back-breaking work and it left them despised, smelly and ritually unclean most of the time.

It was on one such morning that Jesus asks to use their boat as a floating lectern to speak to the crowd. It was no skin off their noses; they were finished with the boat for the day, just cleaning and preparing the nets so they could go home and go to bed, since they had no fish to sell. Maybe they were listening, maybe they were nodding off as Jesus taught, but when they were done, as a way of saying thank you, or so they thought, Jesus suggest they give the waters one more shot.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible says that Peter's response was, "if you say so, I'll let down the nets..." Can you hear the fatigue and skepticism in his response? Can you relate to it? How many times have we caught ourselves saying: "Well, we tried that before and it didn't work, so why is it being recommended again?" Alice Paul heard plenty of that 100 years ago.

And, of course, the important parts of the story are what come next — the huge haul of fish and that strange invitation: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." Most of us are more familiar with a line that doesn't appear in Luke, "I will make you fishers of men, fishers of people." That's Mark and Matthew. Here, it's not the fishing that matters, it's the catching.

I never noticed that before — that for Luke, it's the catching that matters.... But in the events that motivate Jesus to say that, the only one doing the catching is Jesus. He's the

one who said put the nets down deep after a fruitless night for the crew. He's the reason the nets were overflowing and straining against the amazing catch of fish.

I was taught that this passage, which immediately precedes the gathering of the 12 disciples, was about our being called to proclaim the gospel, and I think it is. But I was also taught that the number of fish in the net, the number of people who came to faith because of me, was a sign of my faithfulness, my fishing abilities as a proclaimer of the Gospel. But Luke clearly doesn't see it that way.

It's not Simon's skill as a fisherman; it's Jesus who gathers the fish. Peter's job is just to tend the nets and to go deep when the call to do so comes. And what ends up in the net is not Peter's doing and is not Peter's business. You will be catching people, not fishing for them.

And I think there is a message there for the contemporary church. The world, the nation, the city, is filled with people who are searching for meaning in their lives. Every study shows us that. But I think maybe we concentrate a bit much — I know I do — on trying to snag people in the nets, when what we are invited to do is to tend to our nets, tend to our boat, so that we are ready to go deep when called to do so. How full the nets are as a result is God's business.

And maybe, if we get weary from time to time, it's good to remember that the boats and nets are there to catch us too, to create a place where we can be gathered together again — in worship, in service together, in learning, in loving.

Many of you know Don Baker, the retired founding director of Youth Organizations Umbrella (Y.O.U.), the landmark Evanston non-profit that pulls together a number of essential services for underserved youth in Evanston and Skokie. They provide tutoring, after school programs, counseling for young people and their families, and other supportive services.

Y.O.U. started over 40 years ago when then-recent Garrett Seminary grad Baker found that young people needed a place to gather to reflect on the turbulent events of the day — Vietnam, the Nixon White House, social and economic upheaval.

Don responded to the call for the need for such a place by starting, and eventually with the Evanston Youth Commission, forming Y.O.U. It would be a place where needs would emerge and solutions would be developed. To date, roughly 20,000 young people over the years in Evanston have received services from Y.O.U. But they do it by tending their nets and keeping their boat in good shape. The kids and their unique problems don't have to be sought out. And the results for each child are largely still up to each child and their families. But Y.O.U. is the net that can give them safety and stability in difficult times.

Don Baker and Alice Paul were both called by God into something they couldn't quite imagine. They were called into the service of an ideal born of their faith. How God used their work to transform lives and communities is still unfolding.

How is God calling us today? What ideals of the Gospel are calling to us here in our boat, even if it looks like the keel us up there instead of underneath us? In what ways are each of us individually and as a community being called to prepare our nets and then go deep, even if we are weary, even if it hasn't worked before, so that those who are wandering might find a home, those who are in free fall, might find a net to catch them and to gather them into community.

Maybe you hear the gospel calling out to us from some of the messages raised at yesterday's marches, maybe from the cries on the streets of Chicago or Evanston, maybe from the prayers of children in Aleppo or Darfur or Rogers Park.

May we all find ways to help one another listen for where God is calling us and tend our nets of love and compassion and energy and commitment so that when we are needed, we may go deep — for God's fresh catch of hope, opportunity, love and transformation.

Unlike Simon Peter, we may not see the fresh catch right in front of us right away. We may never know who is touched by our responding to God's loving call.

It was seven years after that 1913 march calling for a constitutional amendment to give women the vote, and Harry Burn was in a quandary. Two years before, at 22, he had been elected the youngest member in history of the Tennessee Legislature. And on that August day, their legislature was perhaps the last chance for the 19th amendment. Only one more state was needed, and only Tennessee had agreed to have a vote. Harry Burn wore a red rose on his lapel to indicate he opposed suffrage, but he hoped there wouldn't be a vote. After all, his mother, an educated farmer's wife had shown him that many women were far more capable of carrying responsibility and understanding issues than many men he knew. But he didn't want to be the one. Then the vote was a tie and his vote would decide it. He looked down at his mother's last letter, a letter in which she said he should vote for suffrage and then come home, that he'd been away too long. He remembered that she had taught him God made men and women and had gifted us all with souls and wisdom and love.

What he didn't know is that Phoebe Ensminger Burn, the mother who taught him those things, whose last note had suggested he vote yes and get on with it, had spent over 20 years reading and following the faithful work of many of the suffragist leaders, including that rebellious Quaker woman whose faith called her to go deep, Alice Paul.

Nets ready. Boat sturdy. Alright Jesus, where should we go?