

The Gift That Keeps on Giving
Luke 5:1 – 11; 1 Corinthians 15:1 – 11
Sunday, February 10, 2019

When I was growing up, I used to go fishing with my grandfather at these farm ponds in Kentucky. We would usually catch a couple of small fish each time we went out; occasionally we'd land a bass that was a little bigger. But this one time when I was around 12, we caught *thirteen* good-sized bass. It was like every time we cast out our lines, we would reel one in right away. They just kept coming. We could not believe it, and we were so excited. This was the most fish we had ever caught in one outing.

We put the fish on a stringer, a rope that runs through the gills and out the mouth, with a metal stake at the end that we stuck in the ground, so that the fish could stay in the water while we kept fishing. We walked all around this pond, fishing in different spots. At one point we came back around to where we had left the fish, but they weren't there. I remember asking my grandfather, "What happened to all the fish," and right as I said that, we looked out in the pond and saw our stringer full of fish being carried away by a turtle and disappearing down into the water. And the worst part about it was that, when we went back, nobody believed that we caught all those fish.

When we read this story from Luke, most of the time we focus on the massive amount of fish that the disciples caught or on Jesus calling the disciples and saying, "From now on you will be catching people" (or as Matthew and Mark say, "I will make you fishers of men."). Those are the big parts of the story that draw our attention. But as I have been reading this story over the past week, I am left with that same question that I asked my grandfather that day by the pond: *What happened to all the fish?*

Simon had worked all night and caught nothing, but when Jesus tells him to let down his nets, he catches so many fish that he has to call for reinforcements. Another boat comes out to help them, and they fill *both* boats with fish. Then when they come ashore, it says that they leave everything behind to follow Jesus. They leave *everything* behind. So what happened to all the fish? I was reading one commentary on this text that said, “In view of the vast load of fish included in that word ‘everything,’ we can imagine the rotten stench that would pervade the shore along Gennesaret a few days later.”¹ So the fish just sat on the shore until they rotted? That seems kind of wasteful and pointless.

But look back to the beginning of the story. It says that the whole *reason* Jesus got into that boat in the first place was because “the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God.” So he got into the boat, asked Simon to put it out a little way from the shore, and he taught the crowds from the boat. It wasn’t just Jesus and these three disciples (Simon, James, and John). There were all these other people there, too. I can just imagine as he calls Simon, James, and John to leave everything and follow him, one of them says, “What about all these fish? We could make a killing from this!” And Jesus says, “Leave them for the crowd.”

It’s like when I was just out in Pittsburgh taking classes, this one day we walked into the building where our class was, and right there at the front desk when you walk in was this huge spread of cookies and fruit and pastries. We walked in and saw it and said to the lady behind the desk, “Can we just take these?” And she said, “Yeah, they’re leftover from a conference this morning. Help yourselves!” I imagine that’s how the crowd felt, as they stood there watching Jesus walk away and then looking at all the fish, whispering to each other, “Can we just...*take* them?”

¹ *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year C*, pg. 140.

The fish were a *gift* that Simon did not earn by his own merit. Remember, Luke says he had worked all night and caught *nothing* until Jesus came along. He tried as hard as he could, used all of his fishing skills, but didn't catch anything. But then Jesus comes along and says, "Fish over there," and all of a sudden he catches so many fish that the boat begins to sink! This is a *gift* that he has been given. So he doesn't hold on to the gift and keep it for himself. He shares it with the crowd, to feed and nourish those who were hungry.

Paul also talks about receiving a gift from God. He talks about how he has received the good news of Jesus Christ – that Christ died for our sins and was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures – and he says that he was not *fit* to receive this gift. Just like when Jesus helps Simon catch all those fish, Simon is overwhelmed and responds by saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." I don't *deserve* this. I'm not *worthy* of your glory. In the same way, Paul says, "I am unfit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church." Paul had been *attacking* Christians, rounding them up and having them thrown in jail. But then the good news of Jesus Christ is shared with *him*? Jesus calls *him*? He's saying, "I don't *deserve* this. I'm not *worthy* of it."

And even *more* than that, Paul talks about how his very *life* is a gift from God. He talks about how Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to the disciples and to 500 people and to James and all the apostles, and then he says, "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me." As *one untimely born*. There is some debate as to what exactly Paul means by that. Some say he's referring to just being born at the wrong time, like he was born just a few years too late to have known Jesus while he was living on earth and to be among the original twelve disciples. But the word that Paul uses to describe himself as "untimely born" is the Greek word *ektromati*, which is

used to talk about a premature or stillbirth. Paul was born in a time when only 50% of full-term births reached the age of ten, and premature babies had little to no chance of survival.² Premature births usually resulted in death. In the ancient world, it was the epitome of weakness.³

So if this is what Paul is saying here, that he was prematurely born or suffered some kind of trauma at birth in a time when such things did not typically result in survival, then he's saying that his *very life* is a gift from God. That he *should not be alive*, but by the grace of God, he *is*. And he is not *worthy* to receive the good news of Jesus Christ, but by the grace of God, he *has*. He says, "I have worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me."

When faced with the goodness of God, Simon and Paul both confess their unworthiness, *but Christ still calls them both*. Not because of anything they had done to *earn* it. God's grace was a *gift* to them. And just like Simon left those fish for the crowd, Paul says, "I hand on to *you* what I *received*." He does not keep the gift for himself. He shares it to nourish others.

We *all* have gifts that have been given to us by God. Like Paul, we have *all* received the good news of Jesus Christ – that Christ died for the forgiveness of our sin and rose from the dead so that we might live forever with God. We are loved and forgiven, made right with God, not because of anything we have done to earn it, and not because we have worked harder than anyone else. It is not *us*, but the grace of God that is with us. And *grace* is a gift that is given freely, with no conditions or requirements, nothing expected in return. It is given out of *love*. We are *all* recipients of this good gift.

² Carla Works, *Working Preacher*, www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3959

³ Ibid.

But God did not stop there. God has given us each that same gift, but God has also given us each our own individual gifts. Abilities and talents and ways of being that are unique to each of us. For some of us it's singing, playing music, writing, drawing, painting, dancing, or some other artistic expression. For some it's spiritual gifts like preaching, teaching, a special gift for prayer, the gift of wisdom and discernment. For some it's athletic or it's cooking or the gift of hospitality. Gardening or carpentry, working with our hands. For some it's sewing, weaving, some sort of craftwork. For some it's working with numbers and math or science or some gift of the intellect. *Every single one of us* has been given a gift by God, something that we excel at or are passionate about that we can use to glorify God. (And *every* gift can be used for the glory of God. It may not seem obvious to us at first. But it's not just about the *gift*, it's about what we *do* with the gift.)

And like Simon, like Paul, these gifts are not ours to keep, because we have done nothing to earn them by our own merit. They are the grace of God at work in us. And we are called to share them, in whatever way we can, to nourish a hungry world.

What is *your* gift, and how can *you* share it with others in a way that bears witness to the glory and goodness of God?

Whatever it is, you *are* the way you are, you *have* the gift that you have because God made you that way. And even though you're not perfect, and you may not even feel *worthy* (or feel that your gift is good enough to be used), Christ still calls you to share your gift with the world. We can't just hold on to them, keep them to ourselves, because then they'll just go to waste. God gives to *us*, so that we can give to *others*. God nourishes *us*, so that we can nourish *others*. The

gift just goes on and on and on. It keeps being given. With God, *nothing is ever wasted*. *All of it* can be used for the glory of God.

What gift has God given you, and how can you share that gift with the world?