

June 30, 2024

Fifth Sunday after Trinity

Text: Luke 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

In our Epistle reading, St. Paul reminds the Church that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” Very often, the Word given to us by our Lord, the things that He tells us in it, and the ways through which He works all seem foolish when considered from a worldly perspective.

And yet, despite the world’s dismissal, and our temptations to do the same, God is very much at work. In our Gospel reading, Jesus shows two ways in which He works through the world’s foolishness.

The first way is in the Lord’s working contrary to what the world would say is wise to do. This is seen in Jesus’ command to Simon Peter after He had finished teaching the crowds. “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.”

This command of Christ runs contrary to human wisdom in how you catch fish on the Lake of Gennesaret, which is the Sea of Galilee. If you want to catch fish there, you do so in the shallows, at night.

And Peter would know this. He had likely been a fisherman his whole life, as likely was his father and his father before him. Peter spent six days a week out on those very waters. The fisherman’s trade was his life. When he replies, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing,” that’s not an empty objection; it’s a lifetime of experience speaking.

Now normally, that experience would be a very good thing. Knowledge of that sort is itself a gift from God, especially as Simon used it to provide for his family and be a productive member of society.

If Jesus had simply asked Simon to catch Him some fish, and left it at that, then it would have been a good thing for him to put that knowledge and wisdom to use, to catch fish at night in the shallows as he knew worked best.

But Jesus doesn’t ask that. No, He tells Simon to put out into the deep, then and there, for a catch. This flies in the face of earthly wisdom on fishing. It’s foolishness!

And what’s more, Jesus doesn’t say that Simon will have better luck if he does this. No, Jesus is saying that a catch will be there. This is a call for Simon Peter to set aside what he knows and trust in the words of Jesus.

Now, Simon had heard the words of Jesus before. He had listened to them while washing his nets and while piloting the boat as Jesus sat in it and taught the crowds. And from the Gospels, we know that Simon had listened to Jesus on other occasions before this day. But now, the words were being directly spoken to him. Would he listen? Or would he tell Jesus to stick to the spiritual stuff and leave the fishing to the “experts”?

By the grace of God, Simon Peter trusts in Jesus. “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” Though it flies in the face of his experience and wisdom, and though the other fishermen of Galilee will laugh and say that he’s lost his mind, Simon puts down his nets into the deep as Jesus said.

And in perfect accord with what Christ had spoken, there is a catch. Not just any catch either, but a catch that’s so great that those newly washed nets begin to be torn apart. Jesus causes so many fish to be caught that they nearly sink not just one, but two boats!

As Simon’s confession shows, this was no dumb luck. This Jesus was the Lord. The word that caused fish to swarm right into Simon’s nets was the same word that first brought fish into existence on the fifth day of creation.

The power of the Lord and His Word were clearly shown that day. But the point of it all wasn’t just for Jesus to display His power over nature in the face of human skepticism. There’s more at play here than just “Jesus can make fish at will.”

This is seen in Jesus’ words to Simon at the conclusion of the reading: “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” This account teaches us about gathering men, souls, into the great ark of the Holy Christian Church. What we hear about in this event on Gennesaret we take and apply to wherever the Lord sends us, even Rawlins/Rock Springs, Wyoming.

As we fish for men in these waters, we remember that first lesson Simon learned, that we must trust in our Lord and His Word, even when it seems foolish from a worldly perspective.

Now again, our Lord often gives us all sorts of worldly knowledge and wisdom, as He gave Simon Peter knowledge about fishing. And we certainly should seek to use the wisdom and knowledge that the Lord gives us in service to His Church and to care for our neighbors. But we must never let these earthly gifts take precedence over what our Lord tells us in His Word.

So, for example, perhaps we have a gift for being very winsome and personable, making others feel at ease around us. That’s a wonderful gift, especially when used to make visitors or new members feel welcome in our congregation. However, this desire to make people feel welcome must not cause us to be silent on issues that might make people feel uncomfortable. We the Church, and especially her pastors, are called to proclaim the whole counsel of God, not just those parts that make people feel good. Worldly expertise would say this is foolish, that making people uncomfortable is a surefire way to run people off.

Worldly ideas might also cause us to not want to put down the nets – so to speak – where Jesus would have us do so. There might be people we’ve thought about inviting to church or times where we are given an opportunity to speak God’s Word.

But then our worldly wisdom kicks in and we think, “You know, maybe he already goes to church somewhere, and I don’t want to make things awkward,” or “I’m not sure this is the time and place for religious talk,” as though the nets should only be lowered on Sunday mornings.

With these, and other ideas, we're tempted to trust our own wisdom, knowledge, experience, opinions, or ideas, instead of God's Word. Yet as St. Paul reminds us, the message of the cross, which is the central point of the whole Bible, is the power of God.

What will actually bring people in? The same thing that brought those crowds to hear Jesus: the Word of God. What will lead sinners to repent and believe in Jesus? The Word of God. What will strengthen the Church to withstand the pressures of the sinful world and its prince the devil? The Word of God.

Hearing the Word preached and taught, worshiping in ways that emphasize the Word rather than detract from it, living in accord with the Word rather than the spirit of the age, these are ways in which the great power of God is manifested among us. So we trust the Word and follow it, even when it runs contrary to what worldly wisdom would say is best.

The truth that God's Word is what's truly valuable, and not the things of this world, is the second way in which our Lord works through seeming foolishness.

Returning to the shore of Gennesaret, Simon, James, and John finally get the massive catch into the boats. At that point, Simon Peter falls to his knees and confesses his sin and unworthiness to be in the presence of Christ. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." The Lord doesn't send Simon away, nor does He depart from him. Instead Jesus forgives Simon – "Do not be afraid" – and then tells him that he now has a new job: fisher of men.

What happens then? We read, "And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him." Everything. Nets, boats, hired hands... and especially that enormous catch of fish! Here's where worldly wisdom absolutely cringes. That was a record-breaking catch! No one catches enough to sink their boat! Think of how much it would be worth if they sold it! Isn't leaving it behind wasteful?

Yet they leave everything, even that miraculous catch, to follow Jesus. Why? Because the faith that the Holy Spirit had worked in their hearts through the Word led them to understand what was truly important, namely, following Jesus. The incredible catch was not itself the point, the end goal. It was simply an instrument, a means used by Jesus to bring Simon Peter, James, and John to follow Him and trust His Word.

It may be that Simon in particular needed this. The Gospels tell us that Simon had heard Jesus before. His brother, Andrew, had brought him to meet Jesus already. So it seems that Simon, while a hearer of Jesus, hadn't been willing to give up his job, his earthly security.

But now, Jesus both nearly destroys Simon's means of fishing – tearing nets and sinking boats – and also shows His ability to provide even through foolish ways much, much more than Simon's earthly wisdom could ever do. Such conviction drives Simon to his knees, begging the Lord to depart from his sinfulness. But again, Jesus in mercy forgives him and again calls him through His Word. And so, in faith, Simon leaves everything. If the Lord needs fish, or anything else, then clearly He is able to provide it, even by foolish means. Faithfulness to Christ and His Word are what matter.

This second way in which our Lord's foolishness is greater than the world's wisdom is essential for us to understand and believe, because it counters an aspect of worldly wisdom, namely, to judge something by results.

If it wasn't for these last few verses of our Gospel reading, we'd be tempted to look at this account and say, "This means that if we're doing what God wants, then we'll always have worldly success." Obedience must lead to the nets always being full – so to speak.

Our flesh directs us to this, because it's often true in worldly situations. How do you judge what is the best fishing bait to use? By what's catching the most fish! In business, how do you know what products to carry the most of? By what sells the best! In a restaurant, what should you keep on the menu? Those items that are the most popular! You use the results to make your decisions.

We're tempted to take this earthly principle and apply it to the Church. How do you decide what makes a successful congregation? Having lots of people in the pews, a big, healthy budget, all sorts of activities and ministries going on!

The thing is, though, while God hasn't decreed what is the actual best fishing lure or what a restaurant must have on its menu, He has spoken about what is essential for His Church: faithfulness to His Word. Results and numbers – be they attendance, budget, or otherwise – must never be the final deciding factor.

Was Noah in the wrong because he and his family were the last believers on the earth, and no one listened to his preaching? No. Was Elijah doing something wrong because he was the last faithful man in Israel – or so he thought? No! Did Jesus misspeak in John 6, when most of his disciples left him? Of course not!

There are times when God grants blessing and prosperity to His Church, and for those times we give thanks. But there are also times when He calls us to leave it all behind and follow Him.

This, I think, is a great challenge for us today as Christians in America. For so long we've been blessed with material prosperity that we're reluctant to risk letting it go. For so long we Christians were respected members of society that now we're scared of being thought of as weirdos, bigots, or haters. For so long our churches have been concerned about the numbers of our membership rosters and if they're bigger than the other churches in town, that we're scared of ensuring that those on our rolls are actually faithful, practicing Christians.

In seeking the world's wisdom and approval, we've become like Simon, hearing God's Word but scared to let go of the things in this world that we think give us security.

Where and when this is the case, we must, like Simon, repent. And when we do, our merciful and loving Lord will speak those same words that He spoke to Simon Peter: "Do not be afraid." Through His Word, He will increase our trust in Him, that we need not be afraid of losing the world's goods or favor. He is most certainly able to provide whatever we need, and abundantly more besides.

If He knows that prosperity and peace are what His Church needs, then He will grant it. And if He knows that the refining fires of adversity and hardship are best for His Church, then that is what He will send. Either way, we His people will be given what His perfect wisdom and will has ordained. We

simply pray, “Thy will be done,” and trust that the God who was willing to give up even His only Son for us will not fail to give us whatever He knows that we need.

Our Lord has given us earthly wisdom to help us in our journey through this life. Yet it isn't that wisdom, but rather the Word of God, that is our final guide and rule. When we trust in our Lord and His Word, we have the greatest comfort and security, for as St. Paul reminds us, “the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

In the name of Jesus, amen.