



Proper 5, Year C – February 7, 2010

Luke 5:1-11

A Homily preached by the Rev'd James Popham

Let's talk about catfish. Dredged lightly in corn meal or flour and fried, you can enjoy them at breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Now that is not as easy to do in Calgary as in the southern United States, but it can be done here, at least at lunch and dinner time. Now, I would never turn a homily into a commercial, but if you want to know where, ask me after the service.

I mention catfish because they were among the various fishes found in the lake of Gennesaret, where today's Gospel story takes place. Although considered quite tasty in some corners, catfish were not eaten by the Jews of Jesus' time. Like cats – hence the name – they have whiskers, but unlike fish no fins or scales. And marine creatures without fins or scales, according to dietary code of the Hebrews, were unclean and detestable. And to make matters worse, catfish reputedly are bottom feeders. So, had Simon and his fishing buddies reeled in a net full of fish, they would have kept the carp and tilapia, also common to the lake, but might well have sorted out the catfish and reserved them for uses other than human consumption. Or more likely they just would have thrown them back in, unclean and detestable as they were.

Now does this add anything to the story in Luke's gospel. It depends on whether we read this story as an accurate report on an historical event or as a metaphorical story with an array of possible and plausible interpretations. If we were to read this story of Jesus and the fishermen as strictly historical, let me suggest that it will say both too much and too little to us. If it is just a news report, then whether they caught catfish, red fish, or blue fish, would not matter. Jesus did something awesome. A first century fishing boat recently dredged up from the Sea of Galilee revealed a 26-footer, seven feet at the beam, and over four feet deep. Two boatloads of that size full of fish to point of foundering is a lot of fish. No wonder Simon and his partners were amazed and left everything and followed Jesus. Yet, in a sense the story says too much, because rational people often are skeptical that such seemingly miraculous events could be real. On the other hand, it would say too little. We would miss layers of meaning that tell us even more about what Jesus was about that day on the lake if we view the story as a purely factual report. And we relegate the catfish to the skillet.

But I think the catfish have something to tell us in this story. When we see fishing as a metaphor for gathering people, we can find additional meaning in the story. Indeed, as Jesus himself suggests in telling Simon that he will be catching people rather than fish, fishing in the Hebrew Bible often was used metaphorically for gathering people for judgment. And in the Greek literature of the time, fishing was a metaphor for the gathering and teaching of students by philosopher-teachers. So, what Jesus is calling Simon and his fishing colleagues – these were professional fishermen, not really fishing buddies looking for an excuse to drink beer on Saturday afternoon – what Jesus is commissioning them to do is gather people and educate them in the good news, of his proclamation of the advent of God's kingdom. And as is quite obvious from their huge haul, when they trust Jesus' advice, the number of people gathered will amaze them.

Notably, notwithstanding the Jewish dietary laws that found catfish unclean, Jesus, a Jew, said nothing about throwing them back in, even to keep the boats from sinking.

The gathering was – and is – to be all-inclusive. No one is to be left out or thrown out. The good news of Jesus Christ is for everyone. In Jesus' time that would have pointedly included Gentiles, Samaritans, Roman Centurions, even tax collectors and fishermen.

We all can imagine who the "catfish" might be today. But whoever the catfish are for us, we are called to gather them into God's kingdom. Like Simon and his partners, we are gathered so that we might in turn gather others to join us, to hear the good news of the Gospel, of a God of steadfast love and infinite mercy. A god who calls sinners and invites them to His table – where even catfish will be served.

Amen.