

**The Church of the Good Shepherd**  
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza  
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany – February 10, 2019  
Luke 5:1-11

*Almighty God, grant us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the next, life everlasting.*

Have you ever been surprised by abundance? The meal for six that stretches to feed ten. Unexpected energy found after having run past the point of exhaustion. The sad leafless stalk of a houseplant that bounces back to life after being watered for the first time in over six months. The oil lamp that never seems to run out of oil. The bubbling fresh spring found in the midst of the fierce landscape of the desert.

In my experience, God's grace doesn't seem to follow the usual laws of physics. Conventional wisdom states that there are finite resources, and therefore one must compete for one's fair share. Time and again, however, God has demonstrated an unwillingness to follow these rules. This wisdom, in fact, is foolishness to God's ears. The grace of God knows only abundance – an ever-flowing, over-flowing river of living waters that is poured out upon his beloved creation endlessly.

But this unexpected abundance can also be unsettling, as it is not controllable or predictable. The grace and abundance of Easter pops up in surprising ways and we are not always sure that we like that. Deep down, I suspect we are far more comfortable with our illusion of the economy of scarcity than with God's reality of the economy of abundance.

Jesus has been busy this past week. Last Sunday, he taught in the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth and it didn't go particularly well. After he made his messianic proclamation, the response from his hometown crowd was, effectively, "Who are you to claim that? Weren't you that snot-nosed kid from down the street?" And they not only ran him out of town but also tried to run him off a cliff. Since last week, Jesus has been busy moving from town to town in Galilee, preaching and healing. He met Simon Peter and healed his sick mother-in-law. He cast out violent unclean spirits, all of whom recognized that God was alive and at work within Jesus, unlike those skeptical folks from Jesus' hometown. And everywhere he went, crowds formed and began to follow him.

In today's lesson, we find Jesus standing by the lake Gennesaret, which is another name for the sea of Galilee. The crowds that had been building around Jesus pressed in on him once more, as they were eager to hear the word of God from this man. Looking to get a bit of distance from the crowds so that he could teach them, Jesus looks about and sees two empty boats pulled up to the shore. The fishermen, having returned from a long and fruitless night of fishing, were washing their nets and putting things away. Jesus sees Peter and asks him to take him in his boat just off-shore. I can only imagine how tired Peter must have felt and how unappealing a request this would be. Nonetheless, he agrees and Jesus teaches the crowds from boat.

When Jesus finished teaching, he then turns to Peter and tells him to "put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Well, Peter knows very well that the fish are not biting that day. Exhausted and frustrated, Peter expresses his sense of the fruitlessness of the exercise: "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing." He then capitulates and says, "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." I can almost hear the sulking and passive-aggression, can't you? *Fine. If you **really** want me to, I will do it.*

So, Peter does as Jesus instructs. He rows the boat to deep water and lets down the nets he's just cleaned. And then something amazing happens. The nets fill to overflowing with all those fish he was not able to catch night before. The nets are so full, in fact, they start to break! Peter calls out to the other fishermen to come and help. And the fish just keep coming, so that both boats filled to the point they begin to sink from the sheer weight of the catch.

At this, the stunned and awed Peter reacts with repentance, and not a little bit of fear. He falls down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" A reasonable response, as far as I am concerned. Jesus tells them not to be afraid and then gives them their mission, "from now on you will be catching people." Peter and the others then leave everything behind and follow him.

I love the disciples, don't you? I can relate to them. I love Peter's reaction to this epiphany, this manifestation of God's power and grace present and active within Jesus. "Get out of here; I'm a sinner!" he says. This revelation of outrageous and uncontained abundance – a riotous bursting forth of life – where only scarcity was believed to exist... this was too much.

About this lesson, William Willimon writes this: "Peter moves from the security of fixed, failed reality – 'We fished all night and have nothing' – into full, uncontained reality. The water is deep and dark, spurring Peter to sense the gap between his world and Jesus' new creation... Then things become unmanageable and scary: Peter sees his situation as a lack of faith rather than a lack of fish, and he blurts out, 'Get out of here, Jesus.'"

It's just too much. It's too much for Peter. It's too much for us. The uncontainable and uncontrollable nature of God's love expressed through the surprising abundance of grace makes us uneasy. We are perhaps more comfortable with the bondage of our sinfulness than with the grand and terrifying liberation of grace. We are perhaps more comfortable with Jesus as a wisdom teacher than with Jesus as the Resurrected Christ. Jesus tells the disciples, "Don't be afraid", but it's scary business to fish with Jesus.

Stanley Hauerwas says that our culture is built on the fear of death. He thinks this explains our healthcare system, our economy, our government, our idolatry of lifestyles, and so on. This makes total sense to me. But sometimes, I wonder if we aren't driven by a deeper fear than that.... The fear of resurrected life. The fear that the God we sometimes worship really is GOD – the creator and sustainer of all things. The One who can bring life and abundance out of a seeming desert of absence. The One who's love is so wild and uncontainable, uncontrollable, unmanageable that he pours out his grace upon us all – whether we think we deserve it or not.

I suspect we suffer not from a lack of caution but rather from a lack of courage. Jesus calls to us now, today, to put out into the deep water and let down our nets. We must dream big...we must love without bounds...we must risk something big for something good...we must be willing to embrace and accept the abundance of grace that erupts in our midst. God calls us to step out in faith, to live with our hands not grasping but open, knowing that whatever comes into our lives is gift and that gift is meant to leave and be put to use in the world, yet trusting that it's leaving only creates space for new grace to arrive.

We feel better with little signs of God's presence and action in the world. We prefer mini-miracles and mere suggestions of resurrected life. We are fine with the common and expected natural miracles of the new life experienced in springtime but wild outbursts of unexpected Easter resurrection are usually too much to tolerate... for they suggest that maybe we don't have as much control over things as we would like to think.

These grand gifts of grace also act as a mirror and often cause us to look at ourselves and question our worthiness of such blessing. But time and again, God promises that if only we turn our attention away from our fears, away from ourselves, and toward God, we will know the truth of our worthiness and beloved-ness in God's eyes. The risk here is not the risk of death but the risk of the surprising abundance of eternal life.

Resurrection can be lived here and now. The Kingdom of God is in-breaking even at this very moment. All we must do is not be afraid to put out into the deep water and let down our nets.

Amen.