

February 10, 2019; Epiphany 5 (C)
Isaiah 6: 1-8 (9-13)
Luke 5: 1-11

Catching people

Would you pray with me, please: May the words of my mouth...

Today's Gospel text gives us one somewhat extended metaphor: catching people being analogous to catching fish. I'm going to extend it even further in an effort to help us open up our minds about the Bible and our sacred texts. This metaphor is a good place to do that. So here is the basic image: Jesus tells us that it is our mission, if we are to follow him, to go out and catch people, and he says that to professional fishermen, who have just come up empty. As one wag said at one time: "there are no guarantees when you go out on the water. That's why they call it 'fishing' and not 'catching'." Both words are there in the text, but I'm going to focus on "catching."

I like metaphors, to a large degree, because I like images more than words. Metaphors help us "see," instead of just "hear." Metaphors are powerful and useful figures of speech that invite us to use our imagination in dynamic and fruitful ways. So let's think about this metaphor and our Christian mission a bit. Open up our minds and our imaginations and think about how we might be involved in catching people.

I want us to expand our notions about this metaphor because what we think of this passage has been colored by years of abuse of the ideas here. Many people see this idea of "catching" to mean "conversion," —and only that. There is nothing wrong with inviting a person to choose to follow Christ, but like so many times with the kinds of folks who push that perspective exclusively, it is a limited and rigid view in a place where Jesus is almost always expansive and open. So, I want us to open up our minds and explore this metaphor in a few new ways.

Catching can mean a lot of things. We can catch a cold. We can catch someone napping at work. We can catch some rays — or maybe now, if your a skier, you can catch some air. It's an interesting word filled with all sorts of possibilities.

So I'm going to suggest three different notions of the mission of catching people that are completely consistent with this story, and critical to our Christian mission: here's one: catching people when they fall; a second: catching people when they are overwhelmed, and finally, we can try to catch people when they run away — often from something bad they have done to themselves. That's a tough one, but it is a classic meaning of the word "catching." Sometimes it is trivial and cute, like catching a young person raiding the cookie jar before dinner. Sometimes it is quite a bit more serious.

So let's do some imagining of the "catching" mission that Jesus intends for us. How do we catch people? Well, lot's of ways — a lot of faithful ways, I hope. So go with me on this metaphor of catching people when they fall. I will admit that I have this silly vision of people standing under tall buildings holding out their arms trying to catch people falling from the sky -- it's kind of a silly vision, as I say, but it actually suggests a real meaning that Jesus has when he invites Simon -- soon to be Peter -- and James and John not to be frightened because they would soon be catching people. One of our missions really is to catch people when they fall.

I remember an elderly lady at one church whose name was Alice Pitkin, who stumbled and fell at a church fair. And what did people do? What's our mission in the face of someone who has fallen, literally. It's pretty obvious, isn't it? All sorts of people helped her, because, of course, she was elderly, more than a little frail, and was clearly hurt. People helped her, and others called the town's emergency personnel, and pretty soon she was taken to the hospital and taken care of. I saw her about a month later when I was doing home communions, and she was doing pretty well. That is how we respond when people fall physically. Jesus, though, is clearly speaking metaphorically. While Jesus would appreciate everyone's efforts with Alice, he clearly intends us for us to catch people when they fall in other ways. If we are to catch people when they fall, in today's society, in what ways do people fall?

So think metaphorically and expansively. People fall into depression, or illness, or hopelessness, or fear. Jesus tells us to catch them. Catch them at what they are doing, so as to break their fall, if we possibly can, so that they are not hurt further. We're pretty good at catching people when they fall into illness of some sort. In fact, we

have a huge medical industry that works to deal with disease and injury and just about any medical issue. And we also have built up around this industry a whole set of good, normal, caring behaviors that include visits to the hospital, gifts of flowers, concerns mentioned during prayers, and thoughtful cards sent.

All of that is meaningful. All of it is helpful. It is a routine with which we are comfortable and truly does make a difference. We regularly catch people in this way. But how about when people fall into despair or even outright depression? That is a much tougher one for us for good reasons. If we have volunteered for the mission of catching people when they fall, this is one that matters just as much. It is harder to notice than illness; it is certainly harder to acknowledge or realize; and it has no norms of behavior on which we can rely for guidance. I've yet to see a "sorry you're depressed" greeting card, for example. But Jesus didn't tell us that volunteering for his mission would be easy, just that it would be important and meaningful. Catching people when they fall into hopelessness or depression pushes the metaphor farther than we might want, but it pushes it where Jesus would expect.

Okay. Another idea is that we catch people being overwhelmed. The story leading up to the metaphor also suggests that our mission is to catch people when they are overwhelmed, either by failure or by success. Note the story: Jesus tells Simon to put the boats out to sea again, even though Simon protests that they have fished all night with no success. When they do go out and put their nets in, they catch so many fish that they cannot hold them all and they are in danger of sinking. So, on the one hand, Jesus has caught them when they have failed, and he's caught them when they have been overwhelmed by success. Neither condition, it seems, is good for them

We may think that it is easier to catch people who have failed than it is to catch them when they are too successful, but I'm not so sure. For one thing, our society doesn't really believe that there is anything that could be "too" successful. Whereas we can spot failure pretty easily, and we can be there to catch people in that with all sorts of urgings of good will and supportiveness. But there are actually plenty of examples of people overwhelmed by success.

Note: the majority of big lottery winners are miserable.

The sports world often offers us some easy examples, and here's one I remember from a long time ago. Years ago there was a young woman named Jennifer Capriati who burst onto the tennis scene as a 13-year-old and was supposed to become number one before she could drive. — this was before the Williams sisters, mind you. But Capriati's early success led to over exposure, too many demands on her time, and lots of money coming her way at this terribly early age. She soon faltered and by the age of 19, she was burned out completely, with a drug conviction and even a shoplifting charge against her. Hers was a classic example of being completely overwhelmed by success and what it could mean. She is certainly far from the first entertainer, sports figure, or even entrepreneur who is like that.

Her situation had a happy ending, though. Somebody caught her. I'm not sure who it was or how it was accomplished, but clearly someone caught her and turned her around. And so, after a few years of slow and steady progress, she stepped up to beat the best tennis player out there and win a grand slam tournament for the first time in her career. Somebody caught her, just as Jesus told us to do. Her life, and her career, was all the better for it.

Finally, I think it is our job to try catch people when they are running away from — well, from truth, or goodness, or safety, or a whole bunch of things. We may be able to sum up those things with the word, "sin." Simon does that, so it is a good word to use.

Jesus's experience with Simon suggests to me that the "catching" metaphor involves catching people when they try to run away from the good things they should do, and towards the bad things that haunt them. Why else would Simon cry out in the midst of his seeming success, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Jesus has caught him, trying to run away from whatever he thought his sins were. Jesus, naturally, has a better way, and by catching him, is inviting Simon to give up his sins and move on in freedom and hope. Can we, as followers of Christ, do that, too? It's hard.

Here is what I mean. I was in the emergency room at Yale New Haven hospital

for about ten hours last Saturday, unfortunately. Privacy is not a strong suit in the ER, as you probably know, and so while I was there, I found myself listening to a gentleman who had come in with a serious leg infection. That was the presenting problem, and it was a real one. But what he was really there for, it became clear, was a prescription for narcotics. He kept pleading with the physicians and nurses for “some serious pain medication, not that silly Tylenol stuff.” He made the plea to every medical person that came into his area, loud enough for everyone in our area to hear it.

We have an opioid addiction crisis in our country, and you all know that, I’m sure. But this was the human face of it — a person so desperate to get more meds that he let a simple wound grow serious enough to need acute medical care — and maybe, a new prescription for some kind of opioid.

Our mission, as Jesus demonstrates it with Simon, is to catch people -- maybe even run after people -- who are running away from themselves. Even when, or especially when, it is we who are doing the running away ourselves, Jesus invites us to catch ourselves, and turn around. Drug addiction, is a particularly destructive and difficult way to run away from life, but it is far from the only one. We don’t have to be the swiftest runners to catch people running away; what we have to be, though, is clever in faith, fearless with love, and creatively sensitive to ourselves and each other. It’s a tall order. But it is Jesus’s order to us and it is our faithful mission. I honestly do not know how the medical staff responded to his person’s pleas, but I know what those pleas meant, and so did the medical staff. He needed treatment, all right, but for a much more difficult affliction than an abscess on his leg. It is hard to catch people when they are running, especially running from themselves.

So, Our mission is to catch people. It may be a dangerous mission. It certainly is a difficult mission. But our our God promises us that it will ultimately be a joyous mission. As Jesus said to Simon, “Why catch fish when you can catch people?”

Amen.

Luke 5:1-11

- 1** One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God.
- 2** He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets.
- 3** He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.
- 4** When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."
- 5** Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."
- 6** When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break.
- 7** So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.
- 8** When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"
- 9** For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken,
- 10** and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people."
- 11** So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.