



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Epiphany 5 (C)

#### **Fishing for People May Require a Deep Dive**

**[RCL] Isaiah 6:1-8, [9-13]; Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11**

Quite often it is wonderful to reminisce about the good old days. It is early into a new year and yet it is not too soon to long for the days that felt better and more certain. Many congregations are feeling a tension and desire to increase their number of congregants. The disruption of regular services resulting from COVID has exacerbated the concerns about people in the pews and the need for more servant leaders. The lessons on this fifth Sunday after Epiphany offer a road map. Jesus is calling on disciples to drop their fishing nets and become fishers of people.

There was a time when fishing for people was considered easier because so many folks were eagerly seeking a church home. For a variety of reasons, people were drawn to church, and it was normal to worship prior to engaging in other activities on Sunday. Churches were an essential part of most communities throughout the country. Families came together not only to worship but to fellowship as well. Potluck suppers, coffee hours, book readings, and knitting circles were considered necessary ministries to come alongside hearing the word on Sunday, singing in the choir, and attending Sunday school. There was something for all ages and genders. It was a wonderful era. While times will change, church can still be an essential and vital place within a community.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus calls on all of us to be catalysts of bringing people to Christ. There is still a great need to proclaim the love of Jesus to those who do not know the love, compassion, and mercy of God. The message has never changed, although the methodology may have.

In the Gospel, Simon is a master fisherman. His livelihood depends on the number of fish he catches on a daily basis. Imagine that, in addition to his physical fatigue, his emotional concern when his net comes up unfilled at the end of his shift. There are likely people counting on him and a payroll to deliver. Yet, on this occasion there is nothing. How many other nights had the net yielded no fish? Along comes Jesus to offer a helping hand. Jesus tells him to go out a little further. Simon is exhausted and perhaps a bit cynical. He listens to Jesus and goes deeper into the sea. Lo and behold, there was an abundance of fish, more than he could capture, so many that he needed help from his partners, James and John. They rushed out with nets and “were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken.”

Those men delivered the fish to shore and dropped their nets to join Jesus in his ministry. As they discovered time and again, this was no simple mission. There would be days of very full nets and days when they would come up empty. Whenever they would feel a sense of dread, Jesus gathered them and reminded them of the assignment.

Just like then, Jesus reminds those who may feel weary that if we “put out into the deep water,” we may catch some new fish. There is no one miraculous solution to garnering new members and if that is the only goal of a church, chances are the nets will continue to be empty. The strategy should never be to simply add to the Sunday attendance, but rather the goal is to be a positive and productive presence in the mission of Christ and to work toward building a Beloved Community.

Fishers of people are as important today as ever. There is great concern about the divisions in the land that are stretching the fabric of love for our neighbor. At a time when homelessness is on the rise and affordable housing is strained, people of faith must go out into the community in the ways in which Simon and Andrew, James and John went out to let people know that God loves them, and better days are ahead. For those who cannot see through the fog of climate change, a helping hand is necessary to remind those in mourning and those in despair that God hears the cries of God’s people and that suffering need not be all-consuming. As disciples, your next task is to model what compassion looks like. It is not enough to repeat the words found in the Confession of Sin: “We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.” That is a call to action. Do you even know your neighbors? Do you know who lives just beyond the church doors? Have they been invited into your sacred sanctuary? Are they included in the potluck suppers?

Becoming fishers of people requires a level of commitment from all disciples. Jesus did not promise that serving people was an easy task. As contemporary disciples, you should know that the rewards can be remarkable. You have an amazing opportunity to reach out and become fully present about your surroundings. Weatherman Al Roker always says, “Now let’s see what’s happening in your neck of the woods.” God is inviting us to determine and respond to what is happening in our part of God’s vineyard.

There are times when the most important ways in which you can exhibit God’s love is simply to smile and to look into the eyes of your neighbor. In an age when people mindlessly walk down the street fully engaged with their cell phones, it is often difficult to get anyone’s attention. But everyone wants to be seen. Even in the midst of advanced technology – like a phone that is used for everything except talking to one another – people still need each other. The next time you are at the grocery store or waiting to be seated at a restaurant, intentionally smile or say hello to someone in your orbit. It is likely that both of you will be enriched by that activity. You may even connect with someone who will eventually join you in being a fisher of people. There is no special person assigned to this work. We are all up for the task whether we consider ourselves introverts or extroverts.

In the Old Testament lesson, Isaiah’s sin is blotted out as he becomes a messenger for God. When God says, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Isaiah says, “Here am I; send me!” That is the

commitment that God seeks from us today. We are being asked to go out and invite people in to hear the Word of God and to be nourished and fed. If the first answer is not “Yes,” that is not a signal to give up and to retreat back into the church. Keep going. Keep talking and remember the love of God that you feel in your heart and allow that to be the catalyst to move you forward.

All are called to care for the stranger in our midst. In times of catastrophic episodes like devastating fires, ravages of war, and disruptions from hurricanes and tornadoes, there is always a need to care for those in distress and lives that have been disrupted. Pray for them and pray with them. Feed them, clothe them, and help to quench their thirst. Remember the words from 1 John: “Those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.” Therefore, my siblings, in Christ, we must love our neighbors even when it is not easy.

When you feel overwhelmed, lean on God in community, release your tensions, and refresh your own soul. Listen to the words of our Lord, join hands with your community at the table of God, and partake in the nourishment that can only come from the body and blood of Christ.

Finally, go in peace to love and serve the Lord. In time, your collective nets will be filled. Amen.

***The Rev. Kathleen Walker** joined the bishop’s staff in the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina in February 2020 to focus on the contributions and vitality of historically Black congregations by helping form a more cohesive bond of inclusion with other parishes and the diocese. The goal is to ensure that all predominantly Black congregations have the best opportunity to make the best use of the resources of their parishes, partnerships, and the diocese. Rev. Kathy earned a bachelor’s degree and a Master of Public Administration degree from Barry University in Miami Shores, Fla. After serving in the City of Miami for approximately a dozen years as administrative assistant to the deputy chief of police and later as a senior human resources generalist, she moved to Virginia and graduated from Virginia Theological Seminary in 2018. She has dedicated many years to the cause of social justice. Rev. Kathy is committed to fulfilling the diocese’s priority of becoming Beloved Community.*