

Sermon: What's the Catch?

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Feb. 9, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

We, unfortunately and regrettably, live in an increasingly untrustworthy world. It used to be that when you pick up a call from an unknown number, someone is trying to sell you something dubious—like duct cleaning, appliance contracts, or survey that somehow turns into an endorsement for or even membership to a political party.

Nowadays, when you answer an unknown or unfamiliar caller, they are likely trying to frighten you, cheat you or scam you. And not just calls, scammers have proliferated over text messages, emails, social media accounts—you name it, they are everywhere, and their attempts are becoming increasingly sophisticated.

Our elected government officials have largely ignored this problem in Canada; the police have turned a blind eye; even the banks are increasingly blaming victims of financial fraud, for being greedy, or for not educating themselves fully.

Ever since becoming a minister of St. Giles in 2020, I've had to remind others to ignore emails pretending to be me, but were actually from some made-up addresses, asking for help, or worse, money. I've always said, if you are not sure about a suspicious email from me, just give me a call. My cell phone number is always attached at the bottom of my email.

One way we could and should be on guard, is following this tried and tested general rule-of-thumb: when something seems too good to be true, always ask: 'What's the catch?' What is the catch? It is an idiom expressing skepticism or suspicion of an offer or situation, seeking to uncover any hidden drawbacks, downsides, fine-prints or perhaps a hidden agenda.

'What's the catch' has nothing to do with fishing, but for the sake of our Gospel reading today, of Luke 5:1-11, it is a suitable question that Peter and his companions ought to be asking, as should we. The text starts with Jesus preaching to a crowd, while standing on the shore of Gennesaret, or the Sea of Galilee in other parts of the Gospel accounts.

Evidently, Jesus, even in this early part of his earthly ministry, had already garnered quite a reputation. In the preceding chapter of Luke,

Jesus had overcome the Devil's testing, drove out an unclean spirit, performed a miraculous healing, and tussled with the best of them in synagogues. A crowd was starting to form around him, wherever he went.

So when the crowd was getting too large on the shore of Galilee, Jesus spotted two fishing boats belonging to Simon Peter and his companions. They had gotten out of them, after fishing the whole night without much result, and they were washing their nets.

For an ancient fishing crew, a net was a basic and invaluable instrument, integral to their livelihood. In shallow water, a net is used as dragnet, to be cast out in the water and dragged back to shore while hauling in fish. In deeper water, they typically did not go alone. Two boats usually worked in tandem, casting and stretching a net between them, circling around the fish, and pulling in the catch onto one of the boats.

So I can imagine their weariness at fishing all night and catching nothing. Job's not done, but for a seasoned fishing crew, they knew there wasn't much else they could do or control, except the state of their net. In Luke's account they were washing the nets; in Mark's and Matthew's they were mending them, restoring the nets to a better condition for the next use.

Then Jesus came along; he hopped onto to one of the boats, and asked Simon to put out a little, away from the shore so he could continue teaching the crowds. Simon complied, drew the boat away a little, sat down and listened.

But once Jesus had finished teaching, he went to Simon with a second ask, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Now that is crossing the line just a bit, isn't it? It's one thing to borrow the boat as a temporary preaching platform, but it's all together different when an itinerant preacher is now telling a seasoned fisherman where and how to fish. It boggles the mind! What was this ask? What's the catch?

So naturally, Simon was suspicious, yet not disobedient. He replied wearily, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." It was an act of faith on the part of Simon, not a strong one but faith nonetheless. He had no reason to believe that his futile action would yield a different result other than another empty catch, but complied he did.

So when they caught so many fish, their nets were beginning to burst. Simon then signalled his partners in the other boat to come and help, and

together they filled two boatloads of fish, so much so they began to sink. It was a miraculous catch, no doubt about that, all because of the words of Jesus, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

The words of Jesus are indeed powerful. In the previous chapter of Luke, we have already witnessed him teaching in the synagogue of Nazareth, and the people “all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth” (Luke 4:22). And later in another synagogue—Capernaum this time—the words of Jesus drove out an unclean spirit, and all were astounded and kept saying to one another, “What kind of word is this, that with authority and power he commands the unclean spirit and they come out?” (v.36)

Here in chapter 5, the words of Jesus now take on a near ‘creating quality’ that had once reserved and ascribed only to that of the Lord God. Not quite ‘let there be fish’, but fish nonetheless—two boatloads full of them. Recognizing this divine quality in the words from this itinerant preacher, Simon Peter bow down before Jesus, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8)

His reaction, his acknowledgement is reminiscent of Prophet Isaiah, who in a vision witnessed the throne of God in full glory and holiness, and on his bended knees, confessed, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5)

It’s the same gesture, the same posture with Simon, on bended knees, feeling unworthy of the Lord’s presence, of God’s grace. Yet, instead of dealing with Simon’s self-admitted sinfulness, Jesus graciously assured him, “Do not be afraid.” (v.10)

Do not be afraid! Fear is a nature reaction amongst a wide range of emotions, when a mortal encounters a divine being. Fear paralyzes us, shame weighs us down while every fibre of our being is telling us to dig a hole to hide in, or to run as fast and as far away as possible. However, have you noticed that in the Scripture, many who have encountered God or an angel of the Lord, the first words they heard were always “Do not be afraid!” Abraham heard it, so did Hagar, Isaac, Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Mary, and now Simon Peter.

After offering assurance, Jesus then invites him, “From now on you will be catching people.” (v.10) It is by such an invitation, the first disciples were called—Peter, Andrew, James and John. It is by such an invitation, the Church takes its cue. And it is the same invitation, we are thus invited

also, to take part in this most worthy, most righteous, most glorious building project ever in the history of humanity, the actualization of the kingdom of God.

I know, I know, we have worked hard all night, and the catch is few and far between. We are weary and tired, and some are already washing and mending the nets to put away. But the words of Jesus still ring true: "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch."

Perhaps we need to reassess our surroundings, and figure out where the deep waters are situated. Perhaps we need to explore new ways of ministry, new ways of engaging this post-modern world where truth is shifting and constantly open to be negotiated. Perhaps, just perhaps, the Church need to be on bended knees, and confess our own selfishness and sinfulness, while trusting in the Lord who assures us: Do not be afraid.

What's the catch, you ask? The only catch is that you might need to be caught first by the Great Fisher, to experience the joy of being caught by the Lord God, before we can have the privilege of catching others.

For those who have, happy fishing!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**