

Sunday's Sermon

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

250 Fox Hill Road ■ Hampton, Virginia 23669

February 9, 2025

The Reverend David E. Fox

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany (Year C) 2025

Luke 5.1-11

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

My fishing buddy in North Dakota was the banker in town. He wasn't just the banker, but he also farmed 4,600 acres, was a cattleman for just over a hundred head of red Angus cattle, served on the school board, volunteered for the ambulance and fire service (which were two different services), and served on the church council. How he found time to go fishing is beyond me. Nonetheless, Scott would call me up without any notice and say, "Wanna go fishin'?" And let's face it, I lived in North Dakota, it was easy to manipulate my schedule to accommodate Scott's schedule – though it was usually hard on the ambulance service; because the banker and the pastor were the only daytime drivers readily available to run a call. When Scott called, it wasn't a matter of when he wanted to go fishing. If he called, we were going fishing within the hour.

I always enjoyed fishing with Scott; because he had been ice fishing since boyhood, and he was both relaxed and funny. We would ride in his pickup on the lake to the perfect spot where we wanted to fish. We would drill holes in the ice like we were Chilly Willy – if you don't know that reference, ask an older friend, if your older friend doesn't know, have them ask an older friend. We would set up our hooks and bobbers. We would run the icy lake every time a bell would ring, letting us know that we had potentially caught something. It was so much fun, though running on the ice to respond to the bells got me two broken ribs once.

The first time we went out, we had fun; but we didn't have much to show for our time out on the ice. We had spent five hours driving to the lake, fishing, and coming back; and we still had to clean the eight or ten fish we had caught. Let me take a moment to say that when someone from the Midwest tells you an hour, they really mean three hours. So when Scott told me three hours, it was more like nine or ten hours, not what I had run by my spouse before walking out the door. After five hours of fishing, we then cleaned the Northern Pike, which a YouTuber could do in an hour, it took us triple that time. If you know about Northern Pike, you know that they have a Y-bone, which is a pain. We botched our deboning job and were left with very little fish to take home. I thought to myself, "We worked all day long and have little to show for it."

In our Gospel reading, we have what is often known as Jesus calling the fishermen to be disciples, yet nowhere in our text does Jesus say, "Come and follow me" as he does in Matthew and Luke. One reason for this could be that Luke wanted to highlight the miracle story over the calling of the disciples. So, today I'm going to focus on the miracle rather than the call story.

It wasn't until after the fishermen had just returned to the shore with empty nets from a full night worth of work, that Jesus hops in one of their boats. I imagine the fishermen were a bit flabbergasted at the sight of this Rabbi taking a seat and then asking for a ride just out of reach from the crowd pressing in on the shore line. The fishermen had to be thinking, who is this; and why are all these people following him? The author of Luke paints a picture that there was no concern about Jesus being in the boat. Maybe they already heard about Jesus before his arrival on the shore that day. The attention is placed on Jesus teaching from the boat to the crowds on the shore line. After Jesus' teaching he turns to Simon Peter and says, not asks, in a roundabout way, "We've got some more fishing to do today. I'm going to need you to go back out to the deep water and to then let your nets down deep." Who was this Rabbi telling fishermen how to fish? I'm sure Simon and the other fishermen had a look of confusion on their face. Simon Peter responds to Jesus' odd imperative of going back to work. He says, "We have worked all night long but have caught nothing." Or, "We worked all night long and have nothing to show for it."

I believe that the Church, and I use the word Church not speaking to a specific worshipping community or even to a specific flavor of Christianity, with a little history, those that have been around fifty, sixty, one hundred, two-hundred fifty plus years, are responding to Jesus the same way as Simon Peter, "We have worked all these years and we have little to nothing to show for it."

"We had the gatherings, the meetings, the classes. We upped our music game, created great youth activities, and hosted a yearly Vacation Bible School. We volunteered for the soup kitchen, worshipped with other churches at those certain gatherings, and put an All Are Welcome sign out front. And we have nothing to show for it now." That's tough to think about and to hear, but so many churches know this reality.

There are devoted folks in all of these churches about which we are talking. As Christians, we have been working hard and the fruits of our labor are not seen. Churches, other than the pop-up fad churches until they have a scandal, are reducing in size. Travel ball, the Big Game, the lake, and sleeping in compete for our one hour of worshipping God together. We must all have the same tired and confused look that the fishermen had when he calls us to do something new. We, no doubt, are saying, "We've worked all these years and have little or nothing to show for it."

By the next time that Scott gave me a call to go back out on the ice with him, I had brushed up on my cleaning Northern Pike skills. I also knew to say that I would be gone for the entire day, rather than just a few hours.

Scott and I went out to Cottonwood Lake in Alamo, North Dakota, and we were slaying the fish. And I couldn't help but think about how much time we would have to spend cleaning all of these fish.

Somewhere at the midpoint of our time out fishing, three kids from the church came over to where we were with their dad. They hadn't caught anything. Typically, you would not freely share with folks about the honey hole you just found. However, Scott, with a grin on his face, says, "Let's drill some more holes and get you boys some fish!" Now these boys, filled with energy and excitement, were running all over the place, pulling in fresh Northern Pike. It was so much fun watching these young'ns have what must have been the best fishing day of their lives. The boys

all had a few fish apiece. We had caught more than we needed, so we tossed them a few more of the ones we had caught. Our fishing experience was so much different that day than our other outing. We not only shared fish, but we also shared joy. What we had to show for a full day of fishing were three young boys grinning ear to ear.

Jesus tells Simon Peter to let down his net in the deep water. This deep water is uncharted territory; it's out of their comfort zone; it's change. The miracle that Jesus performs here is that these professional fishermen had caught nothing that night and now in the light of day, in the deep waters, they were signaling each other for help to get these bulging nets in. In my mind's eye, if Jesus were retelling this fishing story, he would have said something like—the looks on their faces were that of three little boys grinning ear to ear, sharing in the joy of something that they would never forget.

You see, Simon Peter and his fishermen friends were fishing for the wrong results. They were fishing for food or for an income. Jesus had them dragging their nets for joy.

Our churches are working for the wrong results. Too often we seem to be working for bottoms in pews and bucks in the offering plates. Jesus is calling us to the work of joy. Joy is where we will find our authenticity and where we will find our call.

What does that joy look like at Gloria Dei? That joy looks like kids running around on Wednesday evenings, with smiles on their faces, as they race around, excited to see each other and to be here, to take part in whatever has been planned for them, and begging me to say the mealtime prayer. It looks like a volcano built inside the chancel rails, erupting to a hundred children and what seems like a hundred volunteers, singing and learning about Jesus, during Vacation Bible School. It looks like a little girl who wants her pastor to spin her around in the rotunda, after worship. It looks like a bus load of us driving around from house to house singing carols. It looks like sharing the Good News of Jesus through our Bible study at the day center on Buckroe Avenue. It looks like a community that comes to church an hour before worship and sticks around a half-hour after worship to catch up with one another, drink coffee, and eat whatever appears on the counter that day. It looks like a church, full of broken people, in need of a Savior, singing together Here I Am, Lord, and truly contemplating, "What would you have us to do, Jesus? We are your servants." That's what joy looks like. Joy that has us grinning ear to ear.

Let's go out where it is deep, Gloria Dei, and cast our nets where Jesus tells us, to pull in bulging nets of joy. That's worth all the work this community has done in sixty years of ministry. Look for the joy, and you will find the fruits of our labor. It'll come in the form of a nod of gratitude, in the form of laughter, in the form of fellowship; but my favorite is when it comes in the form of faces beaming with childlike grins that extend from ear to ear.

I truly give thanks to God for this odd and wondrous calling to seek Jesus and find joy with you band of misfits.