

Prayer of the Day: We praise you, dear God, for all the ways your Wind blows among us, bringing a warm winter thaw, music to make, words to speak and smiles of love to share. We've heard you call, now here we are this morning to be united in your service. Astound us again with the abundance of life we share in Christ. As we put down our nets and put up our sails, fill us with gifts of Spirit and send us to sail through life, in the name of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Sailing with Jesus

1 Corinthians 12:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

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Before the reading: Galilee is a busy hub for fishing. After a long night a few guys are ready to get on home. That's when they find there are challenges in the life, in the church that are new every morning. That's when they find that God's call often comes not when we're well-rested and well-fed; rather at the end, after we feel we've given all we can give. And just maybe we're all reminded the most profound experiences of God are usually not found in safe ways and secure places. God calls us beyond our familiar even controlled routines into the depths and out to the horizons of life experience. Hear what the Spirit may say. **Read Luke 5:1-11**

What kind of boat would Jesus choose today? As his sandals scuffed along with the flip-flops, crocs and Docksidiers in some western Michigan harbor Jesus could scope out a cabin cruiser or two-masted schooner swaying gently in the slip; an old commercial trawler or big-lake fishing boat with downriggers ready, a family ski boat or even my brother-in-law's little old rowboat I borrowed last fall that I forgot to put the plug in and couldn't get started. He'd stroll by a woman cleaning up around the deck, a man untying lines to set off, or others just soaking in the sun. It's all a bit tantalizing for the middle of January. Makes us want to join our friends or suddenly make a few down in Florida!

A couple friends among us here showed me pictures of one about a week ago that just may be something Jesus would get in. It's a forty-some foot sailboat that needs a bit of love. Thirty-five years old, explained Phylis and Glenda, and hasn't been in the water for the last five. It will this August when they set out from White Hall together with Brett, and pets and all. They'll cruise down the Mississippi, out into the Gulf and who knows where the wind will blow before eventually coming up the east coast and home again the next summer. Now *the Mistress of the Runaway Parents* (that's what they're naming her), she sits in the driveway – more like it *is* the driveway – where Brett fixed the hole in the hull just behind the keel and Glenda power washed the deck to reveal beautiful teak boards. Where they'll continue to work on the wiring and plumbing, cabinets, kitchen and bedrooms below decks – *let's just say it looks like it has promise!* Next picture: a triangular shaped area ... “And that's the bow compartment,” Phylis smiled, “where I'll sleep.” “It should be a fun journey, a great adventure,” I remarked wonderingly. “It's going to be our life,” Glenda said. “In a few years, we'll sell the business, our house and sail the world!” You know, I wonder, I never really asked if they have much sailing experience.

Jesus got into the boat and said: Could I get you to put out, just off shore? He didn't seem to care what kind it was. Though surely he could tell it was Simon's life – his livelihood, his daily routine, his heart and soul through good and bad. You know, Simon didn't have to do it. That morning he felt tired and a bit discouraged. His face chapped, back and shoulders weary, hands cramped after a long night, with not much to show for it. Maybe somewhere deep inside he didn't want to, but then something in the way Jesus asked – a simple request felt more like a compelling invitation. Maybe it was the rumors Simon heard about him, or just curiosity, a mysterious presence made him do it. His calloused fingers entwined the nets and coiled them in the bottom; then he shoved off ... and just listened as Jesus spoke to all those people crowding the beach, and he tried to keep his boat from shifting too much as waves rolled into the shallows.

Can we imagine what it'd be like to have Jesus in our boat? In the end it's not so much a question of what boat Jesus would get into. I'm sure he wouldn't care, he'd be as comfortable in a million dollar yacht or an old battered canoe. You see, the real question I hear Luke pose is: will we let Jesus into ours? Into our heart and soul and everyday life? As we look through the pictures of our lives this morning, I think we see something that just maybe Jesus would like to get into. Lives that just need a bit of love – to patch the holes in our hearts, to fix up the insides, to discover the beauty like teakwood there under the mildew of our frustration and failings. 35, 15 or 85 years old ... we're all setting out on a new stage of life's journey every day.

So what's it like when Jesus gets in our boat? When we answer the compelling invitation of faith? Well, friends, maybe you've been blessed with some powerful moment when you sensed God's presence like the brightest light, the warmest glow. And far more often, I'd bet we're a lot like Simon. Tired after a long day less than as fruitful as we expected – chapped minds, weary hopes, cramped hearts even a bit calloused, just trying to ride the waves rolling into the shallowness of life where we find ourselves. At first maybe it's like he's there beside us but still feels a bit distant. It's like we overhear him talking to others. You know, we've heard some Bible stories about him. We've learned even by heart some lessons he teaches. We try not to rock the boat too much. We even start to feel that maybe God's goodness and love we see in him, just maybe it's inside us, as well.

And that's when he turns and his powerful loving gaze catches us straight in the eye. And he almost whispers encouragingly, "Put out into deep water." Start casting your mind and heart amid the deeper questions of life – why the earthquake? Why the cancer or this blasted recession for so long? Why me? Why now? Why this? Who am I really and what am I supposed to do with my life ... after high school or even now midst all the peer pressures? Or at the other end amidst whatever aches and pains and limits I feel? How do I figure out personal priorities, unavoidable choices and relationships with family, life's meaning and direction somewhere in the middle?

Let down your nets, Jesus urges gently. You know, Luke's the only one who tells the story this way. And just maybe that gives us a clue about what God's trying to say to us today. According to Matthew and Mark Jesus calls out to Andrew and Peter from the shoreline; then passes by James and John mending nets. Apparently they've never heard or seen him before.

Still they immediately drop everything and just go. In John Jesus' call isn't even on the shoreline and happens in far more round about fashion. Luke tells it all with much more intimacy. And I don't know about you, but it strikes me as being far more real to the way I've come to God.

Let down your nets, Jesus urges us gently. And maybe we feel the frustration rising: I've already done that – I've asked the questions without clear answers, I've come to church and gotten burned, I've tried to keep trusting – and look where it got me! Master, we've worked all night long and caught nothing! You know, there are moments when we get flashes of insight, when faith feels good. And dear friends, through all my questions and doubts and even times in life when I've felt like saying all right, Jesus, just get out. Times of confusion and anger, frustration and loneliness ... I've come to believe – better said, I've come to *trust* – that faithfulness is a matter of perseverance through imperfection; a matter of hope when everything seems to have gone haywire; a matter of patient, loving, compassionate grace through all that seems beyond my control.

What does it really mean to have faith, to have Jesus in our boat? Of course, we know it's far more a journey than any special place or status of perfection we attain. It means that when you get up in the morning or go to bed at night you love the “you” you hide. More than shame we begin with gratitude for our blessings, not least the people we love; and we end with Jesus' kind of forgiveness, letting go of whatever annoyances and failures we've known. It means when we go to school or work or even here at church and face a hostile stare or see someone about to be stoned, we respond with Jesus' grace; we stand up for compassionate mercy. When we hear of a friend, acquaintance or millions of humans in Haiti who are in need, we pause and take the time, the effort, the concern to respond in a way that says you are valued, you are beloved – like Jesus kissed the leper clean. When we pursue our pleasures and desires we remember all Jesus teaches about justice and fullness life for all people and creation. And when we reach the end of our hope, our strength, our vision, even our lives, we step again toward the tomb from which Christ rose again to call Mary by name and come through locked doors where disciples cowered in fear. When Jesus is in our boat and we let down our nets, friends, we get caught up in such abundant life it seems we're going to burst with joy, with gratitude, with love that just goes on loving and loving and loving.

Now blessed with this kind of abundant life, the way Luke tells the story, there are two more things we can't help doing. 1) We call out to others – for help and to share the blessings. We connect with them in a way that makes life meaningful. And 2) we echo Simon, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am sinful person.” Well, o.k maybe we don't exactly say it in that way. Not much evidence on this pulpit of fire and brimstone! ☺ And usually the word sin rolls off our tongues in conversation about as much as we wanted to have our mouths washed out with soap as kids! Yes, sometimes in light of God's grace we see things we regret. But you know, it's not about wallowing in guilt, psychologically beating ourselves up for poor choices and behavior. It's simply about recognizing we often feel separated from God's presence and purposes among us. If discipleship is ultimately about relationship with Christ, then sin is anything that distances or breaks that relationship. And in the end, we come to accept that for goodness in life we depend on God. God calls us to follow Christ not based on our effort or

merit. Rather trusting that just maybe the power of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ will accomplish more than we ever could.

Joan Gray was moderator of PC(USA) a couple of years ago and is a spiritual director. She says it another way. In Jesus' day she explains, there were really two ways of making a boat move. You could row with all your might. Or you could put up sails and capture the wind. We see on our banners a sailboat. In a sailboat church we are not ultimately guided by the abilities and resources we either have or lack. Rather we ask: "What is God calling us to be and to do right now wherever we find ourselves; just as we are?" Who knows where the wind may blow before we head home again to God?

At our retreat a couple of weeks ago, where we used Joan Gray's book, Session talked about how difficult sailing can be. She offers a few nautical tips. Hoist the sails with passionate commitment to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Tack with the wind having faith in God's provision. Don't irresponsibly flip the boat, but trust that if we're going where God wants us to, resources will rise to challenge more than whatever money we seem to have in the bank right now. Finally to really discern the course of God's adventure for us, we need to be willing to let go, to leave behind our need to always be comfortable and controlled. And you know, at least part of the good news seems to be that it doesn't really matter if we have much sailing experience ... if we've been doing faith forever, or not.

Now, if you're like me, admittedly there are times in life when we feel tempted to hook up some twin 150 horse engines and make this dinghy leap out of the water to get where we think we need to go. Sailing with Jesus is much harder work – personally in our own little Sunfish-sized lives and in our life together on the great galleon we call the church. Just talk to Mark Gilbert about shoulder surgery after years of winching and tying up sails or whatever else I don't know the words for. ☺ And surely we'll have times when in the sweat and stress of the moment words cast about the deck are a bit shorter than we'd like. Times we might like to plan a mutiny ... even of our own humble one-person vessel like Jack Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Times we might need to row a bit through a still calm until we catch the breeze again.

But friends, you know, the great promise of sailing with Jesus is that there will be sunrises of hope that lead to sunny afternoons more glorious than we ever imagined possible. Even amid the worst storms we'll know we're safest when ride out the waves aboard ship. And all along the journey we'll find we're able to go on adventures together we could never make alone – whether we're in our eighties or in our teens – let's not get started on the fiasco of irresponsibility we feel in thinking about a twelve-year-old girl trying to sail around the world alone.

I don't think St. Paul would have much patience for such attempts to go-it-alone. We all have gifts, and services and activities of interest – a vast variety activated by God's Spirit. They are given to us, he stresses, to be used for the common good for we all are one in mission. Now, I don't want to mix metaphors or take it all too far. But in the end, Luke's trying to tell us something like when we let Jesus into our boat, we'll all end up sailing together in his. Maybe

like a little harbor inflatable going out to the big one moored off shore. Or maybe better as if Jesus' boat, the Church, is really a big hospital ship, sailing the seven seas to which we tie up here each Sunday and then sail or separate ways again each week.

However we conceive it Christ calls us to crew with him. And there are crowds pressing in to hear him speak through us. He comes to give us an invitation that requires a decision – what will truly move us in the journey of life and faith? will we follow, catch God's breeze in our hearts, and be changed forever?

So friends, put up the sail to catch the wind. Put down the nets to haul in fruitful faithfulness. Jesus comes to the lakeshore and while smiling calls out your name. He's looking only for our nets of trust and labor of love that just goes on loving. Do you hear him ask: will you come and follow me?

Thanks be to God.