

**FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY | FEBRUARY 9, 2025**  
ISAIAH 6:1-8 | PSALM 138 | I CORINTHIANS 15:1-11 | LUKE 5:1-11

Imagine, for a moment, that you are one of the fishermen in today's gospel reading. You have worked all night long. You have toiled hour after hour. And you have accomplished nothing. Not a single fish. All you've done is get your nets dirty.

To make matters worse, as you are packing up, some guy shows up with a big crowd in tow. And he wants to borrow your boat so that he can go on the water and talk to the crowd. *Sure, you think, may as well use the boat for something useful.*

And after he's finished talking, the man comes back to shore and says, "Hey, why don't you guys go into the deep water and try it out there?"

So now, not only have you not caught any fish. But you also have a guy who knows nothing about fishing telling you how to do your job. *Oh, now. The deep water. Maybe we should have thought of that.* But Peter responds diplomatically. "We have worked all night long but have caught nothing."

Even those of us who know nothing about fishing can sympathize with Peter here. We can think of situations from our personal lives and the lives of those we know where we have voiced Peter's complaint. We did the program, and it didn't work. We made the effort, and we didn't get the outcome we wanted. We put in all the blood, sweat, and tears, and we got nothing in return. Just dirty nets.

And we might think about this in terms of our own discipleship and mission, too. We forgave the person who wronged us. We welcomed the stranger. We marched in the protest. We served on the committee. We volunteered at the food bank. We taught the Sunday school class. We did everything we thought we were supposed to do. But when the sun came up, we had nothing to show for it.

And now here comes Jesus. "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." That thing you've been doing that isn't working? Well, why don't you go do it again?

It's interesting to me that when Jesus tells Peter to go back out to sea, he doesn't tell him he's going to catch a lot of fish. He doesn't make any promises about this plan working. He doesn't promise a particular outcome. He says, *Just go put the nets out. See what happens.*

We might respond, "Well, no. If it didn't work the first two hundred times, it's not going to work the two hundred and first." After all, Einstein said doing something over and over again and expecting different results was the definition of insanity. What's going to be so different about this time?

But that's not what Peter says. In fact, this is where the story turns. And not just the story but Peter's entire life. How does Peter respond? "We have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

"Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." This is one of my favorite confessions of faith in all of scripture. Peter doesn't come out and say that he trusts Jesus with his life. He doesn't make some grand statement about how Jesus is God from God, light from light. In fact, he says that he thinks Jesus's idea is kind of pointless. But then he adds, "Yet if you say so."

There's something there. Buried underneath the skepticism and weariness is a little seed of trust, a little flash of hope. And it's interesting to me that what Peter is responding to here, the thing he has faith in, isn't a particular outcome. It's not about the fish. Peter doesn't say, "If you think there's fish out there..." What does he say? "Yet if *you* say so..."

It's not about the fish. Whenever you hear a Bible story about fish, it's never really about the fish. It's about the invitation and who it comes from.

The truth is, following the way of Jesus isn't so different from fishing. Because we do the same things over and over and over. We forgive people again and again and again. We visit the sick again and again and again. We welcome the stranger again and again and again. We baptize and teach the faith again and again and again. We administer the sacraments again and again and again. We go to committee meetings again and again and again.

Every once in a while, it goes exactly how we hoped it would. You have the breakthrough. You see the difference. You hit the mark.

Because a lot of the time—maybe even most of the time—we don't get the outcome we hoped for. The relative we forgave doesn't seem that grateful. The stranger we welcomed didn't feel at home. The patient we visited before surgery forgot we were there when they came out of surgery. The child we baptized walks away from the faith. The neighbor we served dinner to still needs the next day's breakfast.

We may look at this and say, *Well, what's the point? Why even bother if I don't get the outcome I want?* But here's the thing. There are some things that are worth doing in and of themselves. Doing something again and again and expecting different results might be a sign of insanity to some. But for Luke's Jesus, doing something again and again and expecting something to change is what it means to have faith.

It is worth doing these things simply because the acts themselves join us in Christ's work. Simply because they make the love of God tangible in the lives of others. That's enough.

So it is still worth feeding people even if we never solve world hunger. It is still worth forgiving people even if they don't seem grateful. It is still worth working for justice and peace even if it feels like an uphill battle. It is still worth welcoming the new person in your pew even if they don't come back next week. It is still worth visiting the sick even if they don't know you were there.

Sometimes the fish just don't bite. The outcome isn't what you hoped. Sometimes you spend all night casting your net over and over and over again, and you go home with nothing. But Jesus is always waiting for us on the shore. "Why don't you go out to the deep water?"

The challenges are big. The outcomes are uncertain. The fatigue is real. There are a million reasons to just pack it up and go home.

"Yet if you say so..."

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor