

The Way of Jesus: A Journey Through Luke Part 3: *ICHTHUS* and All Saints

Countryside Community Church
Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.
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Scripture: Luke 5:1-11

Today is “All Saints Day” in the Christian calendar. According to tradition, “All Saints” is not a day when we honor those who have officially been recognized as saints, but *all* who have passed on from this world to enter heaven, whether they have officially been recognized as saints or not. According to some, this means we honor all who confess that Jesus Christ is Son of God and Savior – and no other. But if we truly claim *Jesus* to be Christ, Son, and Savior, then we’re leaving a lot of folks off the list of saints that Jesus himself would put on there.

Do you know why one of the symbols of Jesus is the fish? It’s because if you state that classic Christian confession in Greek, that “Jesus Christ is Son of God and Savior,” the first letter of each Greek word creates the acronym, *ICHTHUS*, which means “fish” in Greek. As we’ll find this morning, it is not belief in *ICHTHUS* that makes one worthy of God’s love and entrance into heaven. Rather, *ICHTHUS* reveals something essential about our relationship with God that totally upends any human conception of value – and radically expands the list of saints. As we will find, this revelation matters as much for our life here on earth as it does for life beyond it.

For now, however, let’s start more concretely, with real fish, and the fishermen who became Jesus’ first disciples according to Luke 5.

I. What is the Value of a Fish?

Do you find it strange that three fishermen – Simon (Peter), James, and John – would decide to leave their boats, their nets, indeed their very profession behind to follow Jesus immediately after hauling in the biggest catch of fish they’ve ever made? What words of wisdom could Jesus have conveyed that would have such a powerful effect? Curiously, Luke tells us nothing of Jesus’ teaching. He only tells us that Jesus had them put their nets in the water again after fishing all night and coming up with nothing. That’s when they caught the haul. And then they left it to rot on the beach ...

It’s almost as if Luke is inviting us to put ourselves in the story, asking what would motivate *us* to leave behind whatever our profession is to follow a new dream. Of course, there are a few more business people at Countryside Church

than fisher-people. As the Worship Team discussed the story, we were reminded of the story of the businessman who was standing at the pier of a small coastal Mexican village when a small boat with just one fisherman docked. Inside the small boat were several large yellowfin tuna. The businessman complimented the man on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took to catch them. The man replied, "Only a little while."

The businessman then asked why he didn't stay out longer and catch more fish. The fisherman said he had enough to support his family's immediate needs. The businessman then asked, "But what do you do with the rest of your time?" The fisherman said, "I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take a siesta with my wife, Maria, stroll into the village each evening where I sip wine and play guitar with my amigos; I have a full and busy life, señor."

The businessman scoffed, "I am a Harvard MBA and I could help you. You should spend more time fishing and with the proceeds buy a bigger boat. With the proceeds from the bigger boat, you could buy several boats; eventually you would have a fleet of fishing boats. Instead of selling your catch to a middleman, you would sell directly to the processor and eventually open your own cannery. You would control the product, processing and distribution. You would need to leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Mexico City, then LA and eventually New York City, where you would run your expanding enterprise."

The fisherman asked, "But señor, how long will this all take?" To which the businessman replied, "15-20 years." "But what then, señor?" The businessman laughed and said, "That's the best part! When the time is right you would announce an IPO and sell your company stock to the public and become very rich. You would make millions."

"Millions, señor? Then what?"

The businessman responded, "Then you would retire. Move to a small coastal fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take a siesta with your wife, stroll to the village in the evenings where you could sip wine and play your guitar with your amigos."

The fisherman, still smiling, looked up and asked, "Isn't that what I'm doing right now?"

In the world we live in, people tend to be motivated by a very different vision of success than that of the Mexican fisherman – or the Galilean ones from Luke's gospel. In a commencement speech delivered at Smith College a couple years ago, Huffington Post founder, Arianna Huffington, noted that success in America has largely been determined by money and power. These metrics alone, she argued, are being recognized as illusory by those who have managed to attain both money and power.

"Don't buy society's definition of success," Huffington advised the graduates. "Because it's not working for anyone. It's not working for women, it's not working for men, it's not working for polar bears, it's not working for the cicadas ... It's only truly working for those who make pharmaceuticals for stress, diabetes, heart disease, sleeplessness and high blood pressure."

What is needed, Huffington argued, is a third metric – one based on “well-being, wisdom, our ability to wonder, and to give back.”

Money and power may not have defined success for Peter, James, and John, but as fishermen, their definition of success may very well have been tied to catching a lot of fish – their own ancient equivalent of the “money and power” scheme. Whatever Jesus was teaching the crowd that day, my guess is that he was casting a vision that was closer to Arianna Huffington’s “third metric” than the first two. He was inviting them into a life where “well-being, wisdom, our ability to wonder, and to give back” was the ultimate measure of success.

When Jesus tells these three fishermen to lower their nets and they pull up the haul of their lives, it's almost as if Jesus is saying, “So you need larger and larger piles of fish to feel successful? Well, here you go! Now how successful do you feel?” In Jesus’ day, there was no refrigeration. That pile of fish would be rotten in a matter of hours. I think these three fishermen realized that the vision of success that Jesus was casting had a lot more permanence.

The story of Peter, James, and John, practically begs the question of us: What part of our vision of success is really more like a pile of rotting fish than true success? Does our vision of success lock us into a never-ending chase after larger and larger piles of “stuff” that, in the end, are little different than a pile of rotting fish that must continually be replenished to maintain our self-image as successful?

II. What is the Value of a Soul?

Yesterday, besides being Halloween, was the 498th anniversary of the day Martin Luther nailed his “95 Theses” to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, sparking the Protestant Reformation. In that document, Martin Luther was essentially arguing that the Church had locked people into a vision of self-worth that was like that pile of fish. Instead of money and power, the Church’s vision of success was tied to doing more and more to earn God’s love and forgiveness, thereby gaining entry into heaven.

A complex system had been established, which included participation in myriad ritual acts and, most egregiously in Luther’s eyes, the buying of “indulgences.” Indulgences were essentially the way the Church put a monetary value on God’s love and forgiveness, offering the faithful a way of purchasing themselves out of Purgatory, where souls were thought to go to do penance for their sins. Luther

argued that this whole program amounted to so much rotting fish. Since we continually sin, the Church was essentially locking people into a continuous quest to be loved and accepted by God. Said Luther: “God does not love us because we are worthy. We are worthy because God loves us.”

In ancient times, as in modern ones, there was an all-too-human tendency to assume that we are good for nothing until we prove our worth through some external means. If we’re not trying to prove our worth to God, then we’re trying to prove it to our parents, or our families, or to our peers. While the standard of judgment society uses tends to change with the wind, we judge ourselves by these external standards, and we judge others by them as well. Luther, like Jesus, threw a wrench in this hamster-wheel system of self-worth. “God does not love us because we are worthy. We are worthy because God loves us.”

III. All Saints

If you have a hard time grasping the import or magnitude of Luther’s vision, let’s go back to our fish. Do you suppose God loves fish? “Why *wouldn’t* God love fish?” you may answer. So, if God loves fish, is there anything a fish can do, or not do, to make God love the fish more than God loves it already? “Of course not!” you may say. “God loves fish because they are fish. A fish need do nothing more than be a fish for God to love it.”

According to Luther’s vision, we are like those fish. There is nothing we can do, or not do, to make God love us any more or less than God does already. The basic problem in our world today is that we don’t take this basic reality more seriously. We may affirm on Sunday morning that we are “loved beyond our wildest imagination,” and consider God’s valuation the only one that matters. But Monday morning we go right back to trying to live up to society’s version of self-worth, which is very much contingent upon what we do, what we achieve, what we accumulate.

If only we would see as clearly as Luther – and Jesus – did that God’s valuation is the only one that matters. Any system of value that does not start and end with God is a system that is not godly. It is based on continually having to go out there and find another “pile of fish” to feel like we matter. Those piles of fish begin to rot pretty fast, making us feel “rotten” until we’ve netted our next pile.

What would the world look like if instead of continually trying to find the next “pile of fish” to measure our self-worth, we accepted that we *are* the fish in God’s eyes? Instead of continually trying to prove our worth, perhaps we would begin acting in response to worth we have already.

Some people believe that if we were to accept that we are loved so unconditionally, we would no longer try to improve ourselves, or our world. “Why would we bother,” some say, “if we already know we are loved?” Heck, we might

become like that Mexican fisherman who would sleep late, fish a little, play with our kids, take a siesta with our spouse, stroll to the village in the evenings where we would sip wine and play our guitar with our amigos! Or we might begin living by that “third metric” of success, one based on “well-being, wisdom, our ability to wonder, and to give back.”

The fact of the matter is that when God becomes our highest arbiter of value, and we become convinced that we are valued for who we are rather than what we do, we may leave our nets behind like Peter, James, and John, but we will work harder than ever to grow and expand God’s Realm “on earth as it is in heaven.” Certainly these three disciples did.

And don’t we have more than enough proof of this fact right here at Countryside Community Church? Why are we bothering to relocate church to a new place when our current one meets so many of our needs? Why are we spending so much time on Boards and Committees trying to make this church into the finest representation of a community of Christ’s disciples as we can? Why are we giving sacrificially of our financial means during this stewardship campaign, and why will we give even more sacrificially when the time comes to finance the new church we will build on the Tri-Faith campus? It’s not because we’re hoping that God will love us more. It is because we have discovered the same thing that Peter, James, and John discovered. The revelation of Jesus – *ICHTHUS* – is that we *are* the fish. All we’re doing through all this community-building is swimming in the waters in which God has placed us. The waters of well-being. The waters of wisdom. The waters of wonder. And the waters of giving back that which we have so abundantly received.

Happy All Saints Day, you saints of God!