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St. John's Episcopal Church  
5 Epiphany C10 / February 7 / Luke 5:1-11

Two friends decide to go on a fishing trip vacation together. Combining their resources, they make some calls and rent all kinds of first-class equipment: they rent the best reels, the best rods, the best wading suits; they rent a fancy motorboat, a car, and even a four-star cabin in the woods. In essence, they spend a fortune. On the first day of their fishing trip, they don't catch a thing. The second day comes and goes and, again, they catch *nothing*. They have the same luck on the third and on the fourth day and it goes on like this until finally, on the very last day of their vacation, one of them finally catches a fish ~ and it's barely the minimum size. As they drive home, both are really depressed. One of them turns to the other and says, "Do you realize that this one lousy little fish we caught cost us *five thousand dollars*?" "Wow!" says the other friend, "It's a good thing we didn't catch two!"

There is nothing quite like the telling of a good fish story ~ which is indeed one of the ways that our Gospel lesson today could be portrayed. Not because the story isn't true ~ which I certainly believe it is ~ but rather because it's fun to wonder how this particular story in the life of Jesus became included in the Gospel. My own theory is that this story of the miraculous catch must have been a favorite story of Peter's to tell, again and again and again. A story about how some carpenter fella ~ a guy fairly good with a hammer and nail but a guy who probably never threw a fishin' net in his life ~ had come along to give *him* some professional fishing tips! Him ~

Peter! ~ the master fisherman who had all but quit for the day and who was ready to go home! But, as Peter probably explained it, he was a good sport. Even though he told this guy that this was futile idea, he *humored* this carpenter. He would do what Jesus asked and then, later, he would patiently explain to Jesus *why* it had been a bad idea and perhaps gently and pastorally suggest that perhaps it would be best if Jesus just stuck to teaching and hammering and leave the fishing to others who knew what they were doing.

But then comes the “catch” of this particular fish story! The amount of the fish that are caught is too big for one boat, for even *two* boats put together! There are so many flopping, slippery fish, that both boats are in danger of sinking! Awed by this experience, Peter then falls to his knees and asks Jesus to go away from him, for he is not worthy. “But,” we can just hear Peter saying with a smile, “Jesus told me to get up and to follow him ~ and we’ve never been short of fish since!”

I believe that this “fish story” became included in the Gospel because it was a story that Peter loved to tell. And as a result, it has become for Christians one of the most familiar miracle stories about Jesus.

But here’s the question: what is it about this fish story that makes it a miracle? There’s no one answer to this question because there can be *several* answers. The sheer number of fish collected is one answer as to why this event is deemed to be a miracle. Another answer, from a symbolic point of view, is that this miracle was a sign of *abundance* ~ and abundance was a sign of the coming Messiah. But there is

still another answer to this question and it's an answer that I would have us focus upon this morning, namely: what makes this story a miracle (as well as the other answers) is Peter's *response* to Jesus when Peter was asked to lower the nets.

Remember, Peter's *initial* response was to tell Jesus, in effect, that his idea wasn't going to work. In another version of this Gospel story, Jesus is asking a right-handed Peter to cast out his line with his *left* hand! Peter knew that if they hadn't caught any fish by now, they weren't going to catch any fish just by casting their nets *one more time* ~ but still, he obeys. Even though he told Jesus why he thought it wasn't going to work, reluctant as Peter was, he *obeys*.

There are other biblical characters, to be sure, who follow this very same pattern ~ the pattern of responding to a request from God or from Jesus by telling God or Jesus why what they are asking them to do isn't going to work. For instance, in our lesson from Isaiah, Isaiah's response to God is that He can't really mean to send *him* to be his messenger because he is a sinful man. God must have gotten it *wrong*! Recall Moses' response when God asked *him* to go rescue the children of Israel from the hand of Pharaoh! Recall *Mary's* response when the angel Gabriel appears and tells her that she is going to become pregnant! Her very first response is to tell the angel how such a thing can't be possible! In the book of Acts, the risen Jesus tells Ananias to go to Saul and pray over him ~ but Ananias' first response, too, is to tell Jesus that this is really a bad idea. All of these biblical characters are just like Peter. They were all reluctant ~ but all of them, just like Peter, *obeyed*. However reluctantly,

whatever their misgivings were, each of them *obeyed*. And thus what makes all these stories *fish stories* is that the miracle of their obedience led to even greater miracles of God taking place.

Think of it this way: all of God's great miracles and workings within humanity, *all* of them needed a doorway of obedience through which to go. Jesus' miracle of the miraculous catch of fish could not have taken place unless Peter's *obedience* had provided Jesus with a doorway. Peter, of course, didn't understand Jesus' request ~ and if we were in Peter's shoes, we wouldn't have understood either! But Peter wasn't *expected* to understand! He was expected to *obey* so that *through* that obedience, God's greater purposes could be worked out. And thus I maintain that when a person, despite their reluctance, despite their misgivings, despite all their thoughts to the contrary ~ when that person *obeys* what they are perceiving as a call from God in their life ~ that, my friends, is no less than a miracle. A miracle which can lead to even greater miracles.

And we know what those kinds of miracles look like ~ and we know what those kinds of miracles feel like. To a person, I daresay that each one of us has experienced times when we knew what we were being asked to do but, for whatever reason, we were reluctant to do it. To a person, I daresay that each of us have felt our conscience, as it is being shaped by the Holy Spirit, urging us to do something that, at first glance, made no sense! ~ or seemed downright futile! Maybe the action was a marriage proposal, a career change, a decision to go back to school; maybe the action

was to accept an invitation to be part of a team or committee, a group that was responsible for doing all kinds of good work; maybe the action was to confront a family member or spouse or seek reconciliation after an argument has lasted a day or a decade. *Each* of us, I daresay, have had times when we knew what we were being asked to do ~ we were *reluctant* to do it! ~ but despite our reluctance, we *obeyed*. We did it anyway and found ourselves astounded by the results. Results which could be described as nothing other than miraculous!

In my life, I love telling people the story about how no one is more surprised than I am that I am wearing this collar. (Except, perhaps, my fourth grade teacher who is most likely still turning in her grave.) I love telling people the story of how a congregation I served reluctantly chose to adopt a \$14,000 deficit budget in order to hire a new music director and how they wound up ending the year solidly in the black, with a choir that had tripled in its membership, and with a new bell choir to boot. I love telling people the stories of St. John's ~ stories of its history and the decisions that this congregation has made over its 214 years regarding worship services (such as the 9:00 service); outreach projects (such as the establishment of a world mission, the soup kitchen, the Beanstalk Childcare program); educational projects (such as the creation of a staff position and musicals); fellowship ideas (such as the pastoral Lay Eucharistic Visitors); and building and grounds ideas such as replacing the roof or building the undercroft. Some ideas were not doubt considered "no brainers!" They were so obviously obvious and made such perfect sense that everyone knew that it

was the right thing to do. Other ideas, however, such as the ones that I just mentioned? ~ they all came with at least a *tinge* of reluctance. (And sometimes *more* than just a tinge.) We thought that some of these ideas wouldn't work, that no one would be interested, that change was a commodity that the congregation could not readily afford, we thought that we would fail. And yet, because we, as a congregation *obeyed* ~ and because our forbearers obeyed ~ because all of us, despite our reluctance, *obeyed* ~ God was able to work great miracles and produce wonderful blessings in our community of faith as well as far beyond our walls.

When you and I, as a congregation ~ and when you and I, as individual Christian believing people respond to God with obedience, despite our reluctance ~ and when you and I experience the wonderful miracles of God as a *result* of that obedience? ~ these stories become the *real* fish stories of our lives. *These* are our life stories that are worth the telling, again and again and again. Just like Peter shared *his* story ~ so, too, should we share with whomever will listen the stories of how our reluctance, mixed with our obedience, provided a doorway through which God entered into our lives ~ and blessed us with some rather spectacular blessings. For in sharing that kind of witness, we shall become *real* fishers of people.