**Keep the Calculator, Just in Case**

**Text: Luke 5:4**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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Years ago, at a ministry conference in Chicago, the program included a speaker who was well known for his prowess with numbers. Using statistics, he could tease all sorts of helpful information out of the data. I’ve long since forgotten his name, so we’ll call him Jim. The man who introduced him said that Jim was so good with numbers that one time he was speeding down the highway with a colleague when they whipped past a field full of cows. The colleague said, “Jim, I wonder how many cows there were in that field.”

Jim said, “96.”

The colleague said, “96?! How did you figure that out so fast?”

Jim replied, “That’s easy. You count the legs and divide by 4.”

Numbers are important! Once you have the mission straight, numbers are among the most important things. Show me a church without at least one good number cruncher and I’ll show you a church without a sound budget, without sound bookkeeping, without a detailed understanding of their mission field, and without a good sense of how they’re doing on that field. So, yes, as we said last week, it’s not about the numbers, it’s about the mission. But part of the mission is sharing the good news of God’s love with our friends and neighbors. Part of the mission is offering people new life, or renewed life, in Christ Jesus. In order to keep track on how you’re doing in that regard, you need to count how many new people you’re drawing into the life of the Church. And for that, you need to keep the calculator, just in case.

 Numbers are important. Jesus had an appreciation for numbers. Not in the detailed way of the statistician, perhaps, but he recognized the advantage of a large crowd. He carefully chose 12 disciples. And more than once, he helped those disciples pull in a big catch.

A large crowd had gathered on the shore of Lake Gennesaret, otherwise known as the Sea of Galilee. They’d come to hear Jesus teach. It was such a large crowd that they filled the whole beach. They wanted to hear the Word of God. They were hungry for wisdom; thirsty for guidance; longing for grace. Well, they’d come to the right place. They needed what Jesus had to offer.

A large crowd had gathered. So large that Jesus had to get in a boat and push off from shore in order to address them. Some fishermen were there, and it was one of them, a big guy named Simon, who took Jesus out in his boat. When Jesus had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

This, Simon was reluctant to do. First of all, because he and his partners had been fishing all night, and they’d caught exactly…nothing. Secondly, because – as every Galilean fisherman knew – you fish at night, in shallow water. And here’s this carpenter from Nazareth – this itinerant preacher – telling us to fish in deep water, in the middle of the day?! Clearly, the guy is clueless.

It wasn’t the first time that Jesus told someone to do something crazy. And it wouldn’t be the last time, either. And there was something about Jesus that people tended to do what he said, no matter how crazy it seemed. Something about the way he looked, the way he spoke: he commanded authority. If even the demons obeyed Jesus, then certainly this humble fisherman was going to do so. Besides, what they’d been doing wasn’t working so well, so why not try this new approach?

Well, talk about numbers! They let down those nets in that deep water, and they couldn’t hardly pull up all those fish!! And the nets were starting to break. Which, in some ways, is a nice problem to have. Kind of like having such a large crowd on Easter morning that you’re scrambling to put out more chairs and fill more communion cups. When you get those big numbers, you have a challenge in the short term, but it’s the kind of challenge that you want to have. It’s the challenge of abundance. And it helps to have a calculator to stay on top of things.

But now the surprise comes. Having hauled in a huge catch, you’d think that Simon and his partners would be doing a happy dance. Instead, Simon – who is soon to be called Peter – Simon throws himself at Jesus feet and says, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” Where did that come from? In the face of success, Simon is overcome by a sense of unworthiness.

Jesus does his best to reassure him. He realizes that mixed-in with that sense of unworthiness is a whole lot of fear. So Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid, Simon. From now on, you will be fishing for people.”

There are lots of folks who are feeling unworthy. There are lots of folks who are afraid. There are lots of folks who are feeling lonely, and lost, and confused. Like the crowd on the beach, they’re hungry for the Word. Some of them don’t have a church home. Others do have a church home, but they’re not being fed. All of them, I think, are looking for Jesus. All of them are longing for the kind of wisdom, the kind of acceptance, the kind of community that Jesus has to offer. There’s a group of people just waiting to be caught. Right here in Bedford. Hauling them in is part of our mission. Going deep is how we’re going to do it. Counting heads is one way to evaluate how we’re doing.

There are folks in this town who are hungry for what the Christ has to offer. There are folks in this town who are hungry for what we – the body of Christ – have to offer. There are especially children in this town who need what we have to offer. Every week I see the way in which you all embrace and nurture the children who come into this building. And I see the way in which the children respond. They feel warm and accepted and worthy here. So it’s especially about the children as we think about how we can gather in the people whom Jesus has called us to catch. That’s what we do well, so we need to focus on that strength and build on that strength. Starting with Holy Moly and the Children’s Chorus and expanding from there – to Sunday morning, and Camp, and maybe more midweek events – it’s about the children; helping them to press in and crowd around Jesus; feeding them with the Word.

Last Wednesday, just before Children’s Chorus practice began, I heard the happy voices of a group of girls as they poked their heads into the Church Office. By the time I saw them they were running back down the hallway, laughing and shouting and having a great time. I did a quick count – I think there were about 5 – and most of them were new to this place. Pulling in that kind of catch and finding opportunities to share Jesus with them: that’s putting your nets down deep.

The children of this community, and their parents: they need what we have. But maybe not everything that we have. Because I wonder if we sometimes feel afraid in the face of success. If we do, that gets in the way of our mission. I know sometimes I feel afraid in the face of success. Over the years, in this church and other churches, when I’ve been out here preaching without notes, just kind of talking with folks, I’ve really enjoyed it, and it’s generally gone well. And then I’ll go home and think, “Oh my goodness, can I ever do that again? What if I try it next week and I make a fool of myself?” So the next week I’m back up in the pulpit, clinging to my notes, staying in my comfort zone. I’m afraid. So the next week and for many weeks to come, I cling to what’s comfortable and familiar.

Sometimes, perhaps, we feel afraid. Even in the face of success. Just like Simon. And I wonder if that impacts the way in which we welcome people here; or fail to welcome them. I mean, I think we do a good job on a visitor’s first Sunday. But we often fail to go deeper. We often fail to create openings through which new folks can fully integrate into this faith community. You know, we’re a congregation of mostly introverts. There aren’t too many of us who are comfortable walking across a room and going out of our way to greet someone new. We might push ourselves to do it the first week, but the next time that they’re in the room, I’m likely to stick with the people that I know, the folks among whom I’m not afraid: because I know they love me, I know they accept me, among them I feel worthy. So we cling to those who know and accept us, and perhaps unintentionally we shut others out. I mean, just look around the room at the next Fellowship Meal. Who are we sitting with? Who’s everyone else sitting with? Pretty much the same people, month after month. The same people at the same table. And that’s understandable, because we’re sitting with our people. We’re sitting with friends and family and friends who are like family. We’re sitting with the folks who accept us. And it’s good to feel accepted! But in the process, we unintentionally shut people out. Especially, I’m afraid, those who are among the newer members of the congregation. Like Simon’s sense of being an unworthy sinner, this gets in the way of a good catch.

I say this because I know that there are people who have not felt welcomed here. I know of people who have felt shut out. I know of people who’ve worshipped with us for a few weeks or a few years, but then they’ve left because they felt as if they don’t fit in. They didn’t feel that sense of acceptance that, in fact – on our good days – we’re pretty good about extending. Which suggests that if we’re going to grow and thrive and feed hungry people with God’s Word and share God’s abundance and draw in a good catch of God’s people, we maybe need to approach things in a different way. Maybe we need to find a way to go deep.

You’ve probably heard this quote, which is attributed to Albert Einstein: “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results.” Simon was about to fall victim to that. He was going to wait again until night fall, and put his nets back down in the same shallow water, and hope that this time the results would be different. But Jesus told him to try something different. Jesus told him to go deep.

And that’s what we need to do. We need to go into the deep water; out of our comfort zone. We need to try something different; something new. Maybe we need to have some deep conversations here, some deep and honest and sometimes difficult conversations here. Conversations around how we can create some more openings that will help new folks to feel welcomed in our community of faith. Maybe then we can discern a new way forward.

Jesus said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” I think Jesus is saying the same thing to us. Go deep. Go out of your comfort zone. You can count on Jesus to hold you up. Amen.