

Present Presence Presents
 Luke 5 1-11
 5 Epiphany C
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"And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him".

I. Three Gifts for Peter

It had been a long night for Peter, longer still because there was no reward for his efforts. It can't be easy moving a boat around and hauling nets through the darkness; and now that the sun is up, there's not a fish to be found in the boat. They won't be biting now that day's begun. Some nights are like that: The fish don't always cooperate. Time to beach the boat and clean the nets.

Close by along the shoreline, a man is teaching a crowd that's pressing upon Him. If things go the way they are, they'll press Him right into the lake. So it only makes sense when Jesus asks to sit in a boat and teach, and Peter does the Man a favor.

We don't know exactly what Jesus says. However, His constant message includes warnings against sin and false teaching that makes one unholy before God; and it also includes the message that grace and salvation are found in Him. As the man keeping the boat in place, Peter has the front row seat to hear every Word.

It's after Jesus stops speaking that He issues an unusual directive in order to give an unusual gift: "Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." It's not the most sensible idea: You catch fish in the shallows during the night, not in the deep and not during the day. So, it's a bit illogical when Peter says, "Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net." But Peter isn't working on logic. He's acting on faith, trusting the Word that He's just heard.

You know what happens. They catch so many fish that the nets begin to burst and they need help to pull them to shore. It's a miracle, and with this wonder Jesus shows how much He desires to help Peter. Fishermen need fish to make a living; Jesus gives him a boatload plus. The Lord helps out Peter with his daily bread. That's the first gift.

One would expect Peter to be joyful at the gift, but that's hardly the reaction. Between the teaching and the miracle, Peter's come to realize something-something important. He's in the presence of more than just a teacher, and more than just a man. Peter is in the presence of the Messiah, the one anointed by God to be the Savior. Peter is in the presence of His **ETERNAL** Lord, stupefying enough for a hard-working fisherman to comprehend. But more than that, Peter is in the presence of his **HOLY** Lord; and Jesus' holiness suddenly makes Peter see how holy he is not. It is a terrifying thing for an unforgiven sinner to come face to face with God, for then he must confront how truly sinful he is and understand how righteous is his impending doom. In comparison to the purity and righteousness of God, it's a terrible discovery.

Which is why Peter exclaims, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." No big surprise for Peter, but he's half right. He's also half wrong.

Peter's right when he makes his confession that he is a sinful man. With his iniquity thrown into sharp relief by the holiness of Jesus, he acknowledges that he is in fact a poor miserable sinner who justly deserves the Lord's temporal and eternal punishment. There is no merit or worthiness in him that deserves the Lord's gracious gift of all those fish or anything else. No, for his sin, Peter only deserves to have the Lord depart from Him.

But this is where Peter is wrong-when he tells Jesus to go away. He's got the whole situation wrong. It's not that Jesus accidentally got on the boat with Peter and didn't realize He was helping out a sinner. It's not that Jesus has thought that Peter's holy until Peter says otherwise.

Jesus knows all about Peter and his sin-and that's precisely why He's gotten on the boat. Rather than leave the man with his sin, Jesus is going to stay with him and take his sin away. And that's exactly what He does when He says, "Do not be afraid." The only reason that Peter need not be afraid is if he is forgiven; and so, by these words the Lord absolves him.

So, Jesus has now given him two gifts: A boatload of fish for his livelihood, and the forgiveness of sins for eternal life.

He gives one more gift that day. He says, "From now on you will catch men." Jesus hasn't just stopped by for the day. Now that He's given Peter forgiveness and made him holy, He's going to make Peter's life holy, too. Peter will now be His disciple, later an apostle, a fisher of men. The Lord will be with him always, even to the end of his age.

As a sinful man, Peter had none of these gifts. But because Jesus came to him, he now has the kingdom of heaven. He doesn't deserve it, but Peter doesn't get these things because of who Peter is. He receives these gifts solely because of who Jesus is.

II. Three Gifts for You

The Lord still gives all these gifts today. The Lord delights to give all these gifts today, and He delights to give all of these gifts to all people.

Obviously, as He gave Peter that boatload of fish, the Lord still gives daily bread to all people: As the Small Catechism says, He gives "clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and home, wife and children, fields, cattle and all of my goods." Now, ponder for a moment how much the Lord delights to give these things: He does not just give all of these blessings to those who believe in Him or thank Him. He offers these gifts to all people, whether they believe in Him or not. Whether they give thanks to Him or not. Even if they give the credit to other gods, He still gives daily bread. All that we have in this life is a gift from Him, and all people seem quite happy to receive it. I know of no one who says, "Since I don't believe in God, I will not make use of the bread and clothing that He provides."

Now, the obvious surface sin at play here is the sin of ingratitude. God gives and we fail to thank Him properly. But I would propose to you that your old sinful nature is working hard for a far more dangerous goal than thanklessness. Old Adam is going to use these gifts, one way or another, to try to get you to say with Peter, "Depart from me!" to the Lord. His tactic is this: he wants to get you to dwell on the 1st gift, daily bread, so much that you care nothing for the 2nd gift, the forgiveness of sins.

If the Lord blesses you with great abundance, it is reason for you to give abundant thanks. Old Adam, however, will twist things to get you to say, "I have so much, what need do I have of God?

God provides this stuff with no strings attached. I don't have to worship or serve or thank Him or repent, so I like these gifts. And if I have them, I don't need His other gifts."

Or, Old Adam will seek to persuade you to reason, "God must approve of all that I do to give me so much. Therefore, I must not need that other gift-the gift of forgiveness." Do you see the trick? Old Adam uses God's generosity for this life to tempt you to say, "I'm quite happy with all this daily bread, and don't want more. Lord, You can go now-just keep sending the good stuff for this life."

In other words, "Depart from me, Lord. I have what I want from You."

If the Lord blesses you with not so much, you still have cause for abundant thanksgiving. He has made you, preserves you, and provides you with all that you need. Furthermore, He shields you from the temptations that always accompany wealth. But Old Adam makes use of this, too; he turns on the taps of jealousy and covetousness so that he might lead you to say, "God must not love me so much if I do not have so much as others. I'm just as well off without Him." In other words, "Since You don't give me as much as I want for this life, I've no interest in forgiveness and eternal life. Depart from me, O Lord."

And among a few, Old Adam will pull the trick he pulled on Peter. He will lead some to understand their sinfulness and God's holiness so that they feel too sinful to accept God's gifts. He'll lead some to say, "I hate myself so much that I do not want God to love me," or "There's no way that God could forgive or help me." It sounds pious, but it's unbelief: It accuses God of not having enough grace, which is contrary to His promise. This is just fine with Old Adam. It's okay with him if he gets you to despair, as long as you don't trust in Christ; it certainly worked on Judas.

No matter what, your old sinful nature will take God's gifts for this life and try to get you to fixate on them -- fixate on them so that you forget that the Lord has other gifts to offer. This is a real and present danger-- especially in a land of prosperity like ours. An article on Foxnews.com ("Religion Gets Supersized at Megachurches") reported on one of the biggest church in the United States, Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. 52,000 people come each week to hear a sermon by Pastor Joel Osteen, who purposely

omits talk of sin from his sermons. He sees his task as giving people "a boost for the week" and says, "I think for years there's been a lot of hellfire and damnation. You go to church to figure out what you're doing wrong and you leave feeling bad like you're not going to make it. We believe in focusing on the goodness of God." In keeping with theme, Osteen also notes that the front of the church auditorium contains no crosses. "We believe in focusing on the goodness of God." It sounds good, but do you see the glaring error?

As he preaches on Christian weight loss and basketball, the pastor speaks of gifts that God gives for this life -- gifts that He gives to believers and unbelievers alike. But in refusing to speak of sin and grace, he denies people the Good News of God's greater goodness -- the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Christ, who died on the cross in their place. Such an approach says, "We'll talk about the stuff God gives for this life, since we don't have to talk about sin and repentance. But when it comes to the gift of forgiveness won by Jesus' blood and death...well, Lord, you can go now."

Put it another way: You don't need Jesus to have daily bread. The Lord has provided things for this life to all people, believers or not, and always will. This also means that one can rejoice in the daily bread God gives but isn't necessarily a Christian. So why did Jesus become flesh and go to the cross? To redeem us from our sin. To suffer God's judgment in our place and credit us with His righteousness, so that we might be pardoned for our sin and have eternal life. Give me a fish and I eat for a day. Redeem me from sin and I live forever. This is the far better gift.

This gift is also just as free for all. Old Adam will try to convince you that God gives food for free, but forgiveness comes with all sorts of requirements like repentance. The Old Adam lies like that a lot. Think of it this way: The Lord declares, "You have a body and a soul, and both need to be alive. If you don't eat food, your body will be dead. If you don't receive forgiveness, your soul will be dead. I give you food for both. I give you daily bread for your body and I give forgiveness for your soul. When you eat food, you have turned from hunger to life. When you receive forgiveness, you have turned from death to life. I give both in the same way: Absolutely free to you."

And look! Not only is the gift better, but look at how the Giver gives. Jesus became flesh and dwelt among us. On the way to the cross, He did not avoid sinners. He ate with them. He spoke with them. He got on Peter's boat to take away his fear. He hauled their burden of sin to the cross and suffered for it there. Today, likewise, He does not require that you somehow work your way to Him. He comes to you. He makes you His own precious child in Baptism, cleansing you of your sin. He speaks His Word to you as He did to Peter, saying, "Do not be afraid. Your sins are forgiven; and if your sins are forgiven, then you are My beloved child and nothing can separate you from Me." He feeds you with His Supper, bring Himself to you for the forgiveness of sins.

The gifts of God for this life are great. These gifts of the Lord for eternal life are far, far better. He does not call you to pick one or the other, but showers both upon you. Do not stop with the gifts for this life alone, for the Lord desires to give you so much

more. Daily bread is a great blessing; but to focus solely on it and reject forgiveness is to say, for whatever reason, "Depart from me, Lord."

Those who persist in this error will stand before Him on Judgment Day only to hear Him say, "Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity" (Lk. 13:27).

No, how blessed and honored are you. The Lord honors you with His presence, coming to you-and the almighty God comes to you to give gifts to you! What joy you and I have as the people of God, who showers upon us such gifts for this life and for eternity.

Of course, dear people of God, there is one more gift that He gives you: He gives you a holy life. For Peter, it was a career change; he started the day as a catcher of fish and ended the day as a catcher of people. But what made his life holy was that, as one forgiven, his works were now good in the sight of God. As the Lord has called you by the Gospel into His family, He has also called you into various vocations -- parent, child, husband, wife, grandparent, employer, employee, etc. Whatever your vocations might be, you have the assurance the Lord delights in what you do, because He has made you His own and sanctified your life.

What joy you have this day, dear friends. The Lord gives you daily bread for this life, living bread for eternal life, and sanctifies your life along the way. Where your sin once cried out to the Lord, "Depart from me!", He now says, "Lo, I am with you always." And if the Lord does not depart, then heaven is yours; for you are forgiven for all of your sin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen