

February 7, 2010  
Fifth Sunday After Epiphany

“Go, Saints!”

Gospel text: Luke 5:1-11

Two weeks ago I stepped outside of Judy Gibson’s house following a rather memorable field goal kick. Wafting in from all directions was the sound of fireworks and beeping horns, but what I remember most is the shouts and cries of the people. You heard actual voices; voices of men and women, young and old, all shouting out with glee the great news that the New Orleans Saints are going to the Superbowl. And a lot of people have had little else but that wonderful news on their lips for the last fourteen days.

And tonight, finally the big game has arrived. We’ve got parties planned—one right here at the church. We’ve got our black and gold Saintswear all picked out, laundered and ready to go. I’m sure some folks have a box of fireworks standing by. If the good Lord favors our boys tonight and answers our prayers and hopes that our defense will smite Payton Manning and the Colts’ offense and that Drew Brees’ passes fly straight and pure and result in immaculate end zone receptions until a Superbowl victory is ours, you will hear the Who Dat nation proclaim this message of victory for years to come. Trust me on this. I’m from Chicago and we’re still talking about the 1985 Bears.

This wonderful Saints Superbowl Sunday affords me the opportunity to highlight a message that quite frankly, may bring no small amount of guilt and shame to us on this celebratory day. It is the wonderful message of our victory in Christ Jesus; a victory that dwarfs that of our football team into meaningless insignificance. It is the message of Jesus Christ’s death for our sins and resurrection for our eternal life that defeated the devil and all his schemes and broke the condemning claim of sin on our souls. It is the message that Holy Baptism unto faith or faith into Holy Baptism snatches us out of the grip of everlasting death and darkness and puts us squarely in God’s kingdom of eternal life. It is a great message of love and joy and victory!

Now for the guilt and shame: after tonight for years to come, which victory are you going to talk about more; that of the New Orleans Saints or that of the saints in Christ Jesus? I know, it’s kind of a mean guilt trip to throw on folks on today of all days. But we as Christians are called to share the good news of Jesus Christ yet we so often fail to heed this call, so we must be strongly reminded of the need and encouraged to open our mouths and speak the message.

Today’s gospel lesson is all about this message of Jesus Christ and the effect it has. It starts out with Jesus preaching from a boat to a large crowd, and then it continues; *“And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, ‘Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.’ And Simon answered, ‘Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.’ And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.’ For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.’ And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.”* (Pause)

Martin Luther in a sermon on this reading I think rightly tells what this miracle signifies when he identifies the sea as the world, the fish as the people in the world, the net as the preaching of the Gospel and the boat as the church.

We who are in the church often think that if we show up on Sunday and do our worship thing, we're done. We've come to give God praise and thanksgiving. We've repented. We've received the wonderful gift of God's forgiveness in the many ways He sends it to us. Then throughout the week we go to him in prayer and devotions, receiving that same forgiveness and then we come back to the Divine Service on Sunday. It's the complete Christian life. We're in the boat.

All those fish who aren't in the boat? Well, the boat, the church, is right here. We're not hiding it from anybody. We've got a sign out front. We've got a website. We've got a bunch of different things we do that people would enjoy if they showed up. We've even got great food! People should be coming, right?

The disciples fished all night and got nothing. They had all the right equipment, or so they thought. But they were not effective. No fish. What makes the difference? *"Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets."*

The Word of Jesus is what makes the difference. At the Word of Christ the nets are let down and return full. It is the Word of God in its fearful law and sweet Gospel of forgiveness that draws fishes into the boat, that draws people into the kingdom of God and thus into His church. We can do programs and events and Fall Fests until we are blue in the face, but if it is done without sharing the love of Christ by speaking His Word, we shouldn't expect to bring in a catch for Christ. We are not putting the message of Jesus, our net, out there with our voices.

We are like Peter, sinful people who have been forgiven and called by Christ's Holy Spirit to follow Him. We also are to be fishing for people; not because of some mandate of divine law, but because we have been loved and saved and should in kind show love to others. And there is no better way to love someone than to help save their eternal life by inviting them into the kingdom through the Word of Jesus.

With this in mind, I've got a challenge for us. It is a challenge that is uniquely suited to Christians in this region. It wouldn't work elsewhere. It wouldn't work back in my hometown because our team is the Bears, and the only time bears show up in the Bible is when the prophet Elisha curses some boys who are teasing him because he's bald and a couple bears come out and attack them; not a real Gospel message there

But here our team is the Saints—the Saints! Think of all the opportunities we have to talk about Jesus simply because we are constantly talking about the Saints! When somebody says that they're a Saints fan we can reply, "Well I'm a saint!" and see where that leads us. After tonight when people say that the Saints are world champions we can say, "Yes, forever!" Then when someone says it's only until the next Superbowl, you can say, "Oh, *those* Saints." In games to come—not tonight!—but next season when the Saints suffer a loss, you can say that the saints are victorious, and then I bet you'll be asked to explain what you mean by that.

That's my challenge to you and to myself. Use this wonderful football team as a tool to go fishing for Christ. Let all of the whoopla remind you that you are a saint, washed into the kingdom of God through your Holy Baptism and cleansed of sin through the blood of our Savior. Then use the everyday conversation about the football team to let people know that you are a saint, what it means to be a saint, who it is who makes you a saint.

You don't have to club someone over the head with it. Just work it into the conversation like you would any other comment. Let people know that you are a believer and aren't afraid to

talk about your faith. If you're talking about the New Orleans Saints and with somebody and you happen to throw in, "Well they may have got beat today, but all the saints have victory in Jesus," the Holy Spirit can use that.

Paul writes, "*Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.*" If you put the name of Jesus out there, the Holy Spirit may move someone to ask you, "Who dat?" And you will be able to answer with the name and story of the cross and empty tomb by which that person may gain the kingdom of heaven.

We fish for people for God's kingdom and our net is the Gospel Word of Christ Jesus. Gospel means good news, and we have great news to share. It is my sincere hope that later on tonight we'll all be shouting the great news of a New Orleans Saints championship to a region that is oh so hungry for it. It is my prayer that we all strive to be just as eager and willing to proclaim the eternal victory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to lost people who are in such a great need to find him.

So Go Saints! And go, saints.

Amen.