

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Trinity

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Luke 5:1–11 · 1939

Practice sermon [?], written 29 September 1939

Hymns: 297:1; 288:1–5; 138:1; 305:1–4; 123:8

Preached in Gamleby, 23 June 1940

Hymns: 206:1–2; 239:1–5; 259:3–4; 305:1–4; 475:9–10

Text: Luke 5:1–11

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

To be a disciple of Christ means, here on earth, to belong to the Lord day by day. All the faithful who have held fast to Christ in different times have testified that life is a constant alternation between night and day. It is a “lying down in green pastures,” a journey “beside still waters, where I find rest.” But it is also a walk through the valley of the shadow of death, a holding fast to God even when “my flesh and my heart may fail.” But whoever listens carefully to the witnesses of discipleship through the ages will notice a still greater tension than the one between light and darkness, joy and despair. A far more unbearable contrast has troubled their consciences and threatened their peace: the contrast between the demand to be faithful in one’s everyday calling and the demand to leave everything and follow Jesus. The Lord has said, after all, that “whoever does not hate his father and mother... yes, and even his own life,” cannot be a true disciple. But at the same time Scripture warns against every hasty departure from everyday life, and “urges each one to work in quietness,” so that he “may eat his own bread.” Today’s Gospel reminds us of both these contrasts in the life of a disciple of Christ. So we gather our thoughts around what the text says about the two contrasts of discipleship.

1. For a disciple of Christ, life is a constant alternation between powerlessness and victory.

The fishermen by the Lake of Gennesaret had worked all night and caught nothing. They had begun their hopeless toil at nightfall, and through a long, dark night they had cast out their nets again and again in vain. At dawn they rinsed, in silence, the fishing gear that had given

them nothing. Then, in the morning watch, Christ stood on the shore. He taught them, and gave them a richer catch than they had ever imagined.

From that day on they held fast to Christ. But that did not turn their powerlessness into victory once and for all. Peter was to find the words “Get behind me, Satan!” spoken to him. Later, in the night of shame, he was to deny his Master — and with tears he would have to affirm three times that he loved the Lord, this too one morning by the Sea of Tiberias, after a night of powerless work. He carried out the renewed commission, “Feed my lambs,” in such a way that Christian brothers in Antioch took him to task for pride and lack of love. When he grew old, he had to stretch out his hands, and another fastened his belt for him and led him where he did not want to go.

It would seem that we far too seldom remember that powerlessness, the wilderness, belongs to discipleship. It is as if we had forgotten that the Christian faith has its hold in what happened at Golgotha — the collapse of everything human, when the cry “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” comes from the Holy One himself. On the evening of the first Good Friday there were many godly Israelites who examined their day carefully in the mirror of the law and humbly thanked God for the progress they had made. But God’s unsearchable purpose of salvation was not tied to them. It was tied to a handful of disciples, terrified of death, scattered to the four winds, their last hope smashed to pieces. It was to them that the message of the resurrection came in the morning watch of Easter Day. It was they who received the power to “catch men” when Pentecost broke in.

Perhaps someone is sitting here who must say of his whole Christian life, for years now: “I have worked all night and caught nothing. Time after time I have tried to conquer my habits, my love of comfort, to bring life into my heart, which is dead and cold. I have heard and read the word, I have prayed. But Scripture and the service will not open their secret to me, and my prayer does not get through. It remains a conversation with myself. The only break in the grayness is the moments when my own soul opens its most secret rooms and shows me abysses of loathsomeness. Then I cannot even bear to see or hear the holy words. I must shut them out in order to be able to live.” Know, then, that it is for you the gospel exists. Peter had the same experience as you when he cried out: “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” Whoever comes to God without this consuming experience of his own perversity does not in fact come to the holy God, but to a dream image that cannot forgive and cannot create anew. Your very contrition, your powerlessness, is the great sign that you really have to do with God. The

“power that is made perfect in weakness” is already near you. Stay by your nets through the hopeless night, even though you catch nothing, so that you have not left the work when Christ comes in the morning to show you the depths where the treasure you are looking for can be brought up. Perhaps after that morning you too will be given the grace to become a conqueror, to “catch men” — people who see your works and praise your Father in heaven.

Whoever has already lived through that morning has perhaps learned to bear the alternation between powerlessness and victory that is still his constant lot. The word “Nevertheless I am continually with you” has been so engraved on him that he can hold on to it even in the times of wilderness. He also receives new strength from God’s continued faithfulness. He sees that even in what is bitter and hard, it is God’s unshakable love that leads him. But instead he must often feel the other contrast in discipleship:

2. The contrast between the demand for faithfulness and the demand to set out.

When the Lord came, the disciples were busy rinsing their nets. Their eyes were on the toil that usually filled their ordinary everyday life, not on the Lord. The Gospels overflow with stories of how Christ, in this way, unasked and unsought, steps with the word of life into people’s meager and unspiritual world of work. The Bible reader also knows how often the Master has a short, dismissive answer for many of those who seek him out to ask him questions about spiritual things. This is worth noticing in a time when Christian “movements” of various kinds are taken as a good sign without further ado. The text goes on to tell that Christ gave the working men advice about what they had in hand. He certainly helped them with much else too — he “taught the people from the boat” — but in the text we learn only that he helped them to fish. Whoever wants to split life into an earthly half, which we can manage ourselves, and a spiritual half, where we need God, can find no support for that idea in the New Testament. The whole earth, with all its occupations and tasks, rests in God’s hand.

And yet — “when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.” It is true that the three disciples our text tells of were called to be apostles, and that in our Gospels the name of disciple belongs to a larger band who stayed in their everyday life. But this is not the only time that Jesus demands a thoroughgoing change in the outward shape of a life. It is as if the willingness to set out for the Savior were a gauge of the earnestness of faith.

Whoever seeks to follow the Lord today is no stranger to this strange doubleness in the Christian life. He knows that the simple demands of his calling hold, for the eye of faith, riches beyond measure. He can see the tasks that the weekday morning sets before him as a gift from the Lord of life, and he knows something of the joy of going to rest “tired, but with a good conscience” when the day is over — a day filled to the brim with worldly tasks. At times he sees a corner of the veil over the Creator’s work lifted, and he senses how the Merciful One, precisely by letting each one see to his own work, keeps letting new gifts fall to his children’s lot. Christ goes invisibly through the world of quiet and faithful work without being talked about — just as he was near, in his holiness, to the three men who saw only their nets, their work, and not the Lord. Whoever has sensed something of this, and has also seen how much harm he has often done by meddling, in officious zeal, in what was not his task, set before him from outside, wants to thank God for his limited calling and to be “faithful in little,” without glancing sideways.

But we must also really be able to see our work as a calling from the holy God. It may be that God wants something else of us than what we are doing now. If so, we may believe that two things together are the sign for us to set out: a constant difficulty in truly praying for strength for the work we are doing now, and a clear assurance that another work within our reach has meaning. The alternation in the life of discipleship between night and day, powerlessness and victory, does make the decision harder for us. In the times of powerlessness, when everything is wrapped in darkness, we often cannot see anything as God’s will for us. Then there is nothing left but to wait for the Lord, as watchmen wait for the morning. Then it is best to be faithful in what one has. It may be that when the day dawns, it gives us back our former world of work as a gift from God’s hands. But it may also happen that the morning, the victory, shows us new ways. Christ stands there and tells us to bring the boats to land, leave everything, and follow him. Then this word holds: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” “Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

But whatever discipleship brings — powerlessness or victory, setting out or rest — as long as we hear the Shepherd’s voice, we thank God. The song of praise of the true disciples sounds quietly and expectantly in the valley, and “like the roar of many waters” from the heights and mountains of the life of faith. It rises like a morning hymn out of everyday toil when we may walk “in works prepared beforehand.” But it can also be a song for the road when the time to set out has come. God spare us from days when our song of praise must fall silent — days when “the word of the Lord” no longer “comes.” Amen.

To him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Translator's notes. The heading word "PRAKTARPREDIKAN" is unclear; it is read as a practice sermon and marked [?]. The heading gives two hymn lists, the first for the sermon as written in 1939 and the second for its delivery in Gamleby in 1940; both are kept in that order. "Uppbrott" is rendered "setting out" throughout, so that the second contrast stays one word. Psalm 23 and Psalm 73 are quoted in clear modern English, following his wording. The closing doxology is Ephesians 3:20–21.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·