

January 24, 2021 – Christ the Rock, Farmington NM

PETER -- A MAN WHO PUT FIRST THINGS FIRST.

Today's Gospel-reading gave a short account of the calling of Andrew, Peter, James and John to become followers of Jesus. I'll like to read you Luke's more detailed account of that same event.
Text: Luke 5:1-11

He's called "the Big Fisherman." Without a doubt, he was a man of rugged physique, strong body, rough hands, wind-weathered face. He was accustomed to hauling in nets full of fish and sailing a boat on stormy seas. Of all the people in the Bible, he is perhaps the easiest one for us to identify with because in so many ways he was like we are. For one thing, Peter had a tendency to talk without thinking. There were times when he even dared to contradict Jesus and set him straight. Peter, like all of us, needed to recall the warning: "Caution: be sure brain is in gear, before putting mouth into motion." We can see ourselves in Peter also because he had a tendency to act impulsively. Without considering the consequences he would charge ahead and then, when it was too late, realize what a fix he had gotten himself into. Like the time he got out of the boat to walk on the water to Jesus. After a few steps he looked at the waves all around and realized what he had done. We can see ourselves in Peter also because, in spite of his big talk and good intentions, he failed so miserably when the chips were down. On Maundy Thursday evening Peter assured Jesus: "I will never deny you. Why, I'd be willing to die for you." A few hours later, he cursed and swore that he didn't even know who Jesus was. Peter's foibles, failings and foolishnesses tell us that there is hope for each of us.

Today we meet Peter in an incident we can also apply to ourselves. We will see PETER as A MAN WHO PUT FIRST THINGS FIRST.

A large crowd of people had crowded around Jesus as he stood near Peter's fishing boat on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Peter was a fisherman. As Jesus preached, Peter was busy at his trade. Together with his partners, Peter was busy cleaning the fish nets. There could be no fishing if the nets were not in good order for the approaching night. Peter and his partners had important work to do. They didn't go fishing for recreation! It was their livelihood! Peter was married. His wife's mother lived at this home. With mouths to feed and people depending on him, Peter had plenty of reason to prepare for the coming night's work.

But the Lord had need of Peter that day. People who did not yet have saving faith were eager to hear the words of eternal life that Jesus was offering. The crush of the crowd made Jesus' task of preaching nearly impossible. So the Lord turned to Simon Peter for help. Jesus stepped into Peter's boat and asked him to push out a little from shore, just far enough so that he could be seen and heard by all the people. How did Peter react to the Savior's request? Could he possibly spare the time? Could he give Jesus priority over the important earthly work he had to do?

Yes, he could and he did. Peter left his work on the shore and pushed his boat out onto the lake so that Jesus might sit in it and use it as a pulpit. Incidentally it was customary in those days for a rabbi to sit down while preaching and teaching. Willingly, lovingly Peter put first things first. He would do what he could for the sake of the gospel. We can even imagine that he stopped his net-minding and sat there listening to Jesus.

To us also, the Lord says, Put first things first. “Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness,” Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount. Putting first things first is an attitude of love and thanksgiving for what God has done for us in his Son. It is the desire to serve our God, offering our lives back to him as “living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.” First things first is a matter of trusting God’s Word and doing what it says. Jesus put it this way: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 7:21). It is God’s will that we believe in Jesus Christ, yes, but also that we serve and obey Him. Do you remember how Jesus concluded his Sermon on the Mount – the application he gave for all our lives? “Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock” (Mat 7:24-25).

Putting first things first is Christian stewardship. Each of us is a manager of what God has entrusted to us; each of us is asked to use it well.

“Your money or your life,” the robber shouted as he pointed his gun at the man’s head. “Take my life,” the man replied; “I’m saving my money for my old age.” How foolish! Our time, our energy, our money are not to be hoarded, but used, Jesus says, so that, when they are gone or need to be left behind at death, there will be a long line of people waiting in heaven to thank us for the good we did for them.

Each of us should ask: “I am a steward of my time -- how am I using it? I am a steward of my health -- how am I taking care of it? I am a steward of my voice -- what am I speaking and singing? I am a steward of my money -- how am I investing it? I am a steward of my children and my congregation’s children -- how am I training them? I am a steward of my Christian knowledge -- what am I doing to increase it? I am a steward of the privilege of prayer -- how frequent are my talks with God? I am a steward of the Gospel message -- with whom am I sharing it?” The Lord has entrusted to each of us gifts to use in his service. He doesn’t expect us to use gifts that we haven’t got. He does expect us to use the gifts he has given us.

After Jesus finished preaching, he asked Peter to go out to deep water and let down his net for a catch. “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.” Peter was ready to obey the Lord’s command in spite of the foolishness of it. Galilean fishermen didn’t cast their nets into the deep parts of the sea; by experience they had learned the best fishing was closer to shore in the shallower water. And every Galilean fisherman knew that you didn’t fish during the heat of the day under the blazing afternoon sun; fishing was best in the cool of the evening or at night. If Peter did what Jesus commanded, he would have exposed himself to ridicule -- all the people in that crowd knew where to fish and when. They’d have a good laugh at Peter’s expense if he went out into deep water and let down his nets as Jesus said.

Jesus intended his command to be one that sounded foolish to knowledgeable fishermen. He was summoning Peter to put aside experience and reason and simply take Jesus at his Word. Dismissing common sense, conventional wisdom, science, and years of personal experience, Peter was to be guided solely and completely by the Word of the Lord. In this command the Lord was training Peter for future apostleship. The Word of God was to be the sole standard and guide for all that was taught and done to build up Christ’s Church.

And so it is today! God builds his Church on the Word, recorded and preserved for us in the Bible. Paul describes the church as “built on the foundation of the Prophets and Apostles” -- built on the Old Testament Scriptures given by the prophets-- those men who preached God’s message to the people of their age and then wrote it down for future ages; built on the New Testament Scriptures given by and through the apostles, the men personally selected and trained by Jesus and then sent out to share the Good News of forgiveness and eternal life through faith in Jesus. The Bible is God’s inspired and inerrant Word. It is to be the sole standard and guide for all that is taught in the Church. In the same way as Jesus called to Peter to put aside reason and experience and trust Jesus’ words – in that same way he calls on us to trust his Word recorded in our Bible. He calls on us to make Christ the Rock Lutheran Church a place *Where God’s Word is still God’s Word*.

Peter did trust Jesus’ words! He launched out into the deep. There he let down his nets. He heard Jesus’ words and obeyed them. It was a case of putting first things first -- not his reason, not what others thought, not even his reputation -- none of these really mattered. The Word of the Lord took priority over all the other things. “Because you say so, Lord, I will do it,” Peter replies to Jesus.

Peter put first things first. And Jesus did not forget Peter. Earlier Jesus had healed Peter’s mother-in-law. It was a little thing as far as the course of history for this universe is concerned. But it was important to Peter and his wife. Jesus used his power to bless them and to show that he cares about the little things that matter to us, too. There’s no such thing as chance for a Christian. There is no such thing as something too insignificant for Jesus to bother about. The Bible says: “From Him and through Him and to Him are all things” (Rom 11:36).

When Peter obeyed the Lord’s command and dropped his nets for a catch, he immediately had more fish than he could handle -- and more than he needed. He was so richly blessed that the abundance actually became a problem. The boat began to sink. It wasn’t built to hold such a load. Jesus used his power to bless Peter with fish to feed his family and meet his needs, enough and more than enough. Giving Peter a supply of fish was a little thing, too, as far as the course of history for the universe goes. But it was important to Peter. Jesus has almighty power, and he is not afraid to use it for the good of his people, even if it is a little thing we’re concerned about.

But Jesus is especially concerned about the things that really matter. Peter’s reaction to the miracle Jesus had worked was to realize his unworthiness of such divine blessing. He fell to his knees: “Go away from me, Lord: I am a sinful man!” Jesus didn’t argue with Peter’s confession of his sin and unworthiness. He didn’t say: “That’s okay Peter; you’re not so bad.” Jesus didn’t minimize Peter’s sinfulness. Rather Jesus forgives Peter his sins and gives the added assurance that he would take the forgiven Peter into his service. Jesus said: “Don’t be afraid, from now on you will catch men.” The Lord used an interested Greek word here. He used a word that means to “catch alive” or to “take living captives.” Peter and the rest of the apostles would take the powerful gospel-message to the world of their day.

When we scrutinize our lives in the light of God’s holy Law, when we compare our attitudes to God’s mercy and love, his patience and unfailing kindness, when we consider the filthy rags of our righteousnesses when compared to God’s glory and splendor, when we honestly admit that selfishness has often been the mark of our stewardship, when we remember that on Judgment Day we will stand before that perfect Judge, we realize how unworthy we are. Our sin condemns us! 500 years ago Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses which began the Reformation. In the very

first of his 95 Theses he wrote: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "repent," he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." We Christians, who have the new spiritual life God has planted in us, are aware of our sinfulness and rely upon God for his forgiveness. The Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution provides that "No person shall... be subject for the same offense to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb." This means that in America's courts an individual cannot be tried or punished twice for the same offense. This applies perfectly to what Jesus Christ came to do. God condemned Jesus *in our place* for every sin we will ever commit. For that reason, our sins are no longer held against us. One person has already taken our penalty. Now we don't have to pay the price. As a result of what Christ did, the Bible says: "God forgave us *all our sins*"(Col 2:13). I searched Google to find a legal definition for all. In several cases I found the definition: "ALL includes everything and excludes nothing." Jesus paid for every one of our sins, excluding not one of them.

On Good Friday Christ cried out from the cross. "It is finished! The debt is paid." On Easter he rose from the grave as proof that we now have been justified, have been declared righteous. We are now -- because of Christ's death and resurrection -- restored as Children of God. This wondrous truth is revealed in God's Word and comprehended by faith. Jesus has used his power to see that the message of Good News is preached to us, and he uses his power to bring us to saving faith through it.

Through faith we become the children of God for time and for all eternity. Jesus now wants to use us as fishers of men, so others come to that same blessing.

I'd like to give you a homework assignment. I'd like you to prepare a one or two sentence testimony of what Jesus means to you, of what benefits you get from worshiping him. In other words, in a sentence or two, prepare an answer for when someone asks you: "Why do you go to church?" Then I'd like you to pray dangerously, pray that the Lord give you an opportunity to give your testimony.

Let me give you one example of what God can do through a simple testimony. An elderly man in Kenosha, Wisconsin, learned he had relatives in Albania and started corresponding with them. Albania at that time was under a repressive communist dictator who had outlawed all religion and who forbade any foreign travel. In his letter the elderly man wrote: "I'd like to meet you, but, since you cannot leave Albania and I am too old to travel to Albania, the only hope of meeting you is if we meet in Heaven." He included an evangelism tract. The result was that the family in Albania became Christians. Vitori, the wife, baptized her husband Agron, who in turn baptized his wife and two children. Then when communism collapsed, this family contacted the WELS for help in starting a church. I had the privilege of giving Agron pastoral training over six summers in Albania, and now Agron is a pastor and the head of the Albanian Lutheran Church, a sister-church to our WELS, one of 40 national churches across the globe that are one with us in doctrine and practice.

Today the Lord calls to us: Put first things first. Believe Jesus' words and serve him faithfully. Then like Peter, we too will learn that the Word is powerful, and God will use it to bless us. And when we share that powerful Word, God will use us to bring blessing to others.