

A Whale of a Tale About A Tail of a Whale - Luke 5: 1-11
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond
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Though I have never counted, I suspect one (perhaps the most) named vocation in the Bible is the fisherman. Most of Jesus' disciples were drawn from the fishing industry of the day. If you have ever been around people who fish, then you might know that they are often the biggest tellers of tales to be found. No doubt the fishing disciples of Jesus could also tell a good fishing tale. I can well imagine they told some Whales of Tales to each other and those who enjoyed their imaginations.

Tale: Two friends spent a lot of time fishing and would always be exchanging stories. One day as they sat by the water telling each other about recent fishing, the one friend explains how the day before he caught a 28 inch trout (use hands to describe). "No kidding?" responded his friend. "You know, yesterday I went fishing off the railroad trestle and the most incredible thing happened. I threw my line in the water and immediately had a hit. I reeled it in and it was a railroad lantern, you know, the kind that would be on the caboose, the old oil lamps, not the electric. Here is the amazing part: I don't know how long it was in the water but the darn thing was still lit. Can you imagine that, it was still lit?"

His friend looked over the top of his wire rim glasses and said to his long-time fishing buddy "That is the most exaggerated story I have ever heard you tell." The other man scratched his head and after a moment of thought replied, "Okay, I will blow the flame out if you take 15 inches off your trout."

The scriptures are filled with fishing stories, and some of them are a Whale of a Tale. The most notable fishing tale is about Jonah and the whale. It is a great tale, but everyone knows no one could live in the belly of a whale because, within no time, digestive juices would do nasty things to Jonah. Of course a great piece of writing that many of you are undoubtedly familiar with is Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, a story of an obsession by Captain Ahab to defeat the white whale Moby Dick.

I have had the opportunity to do whale watching in two locations that are far distant from each other. In Hawaii at this time of year the whales are easy to see. Kind of like people, whales go to Hawaii for the winter. You can stand on the shore and see their tails smack against the water and send up a splash of white water.

We once took a snorkeling excursion from Kawai to Nihau. Nihau is the privately owned island that has Hawaiian people only living there. Though we did not go onto the island, we snorkeled in the waters. On the crossing, the boat captain became overly excited and spun the boat around and declared “Look folks, this is only the second time in all my years of doing this that I am seeing False Whales (really a dolphin).” That is a real whale tale.

During a vacation trip to Newfoundland we went on a whale watching tour and ended-up in the middle of a pod, with occasional whale tails smacking against the water. I became aware of how big the whales were and how small our boat was, but everything went well. The size of the whale that was in front of the whale’s tail is incredible! That is another Whale of a Tale about the Tail of a Whale. I enjoy fishing, but I cannot even imagine what it would like to catch a whale by the tail.

Today’s scripture reading is not about whales in the water, but is about an enormous amount of fish being caught by the disciples of Jesus by simply casting their nets where he instructed them to cast. The image of such a massive catch is a vivid image for any who would follow Jesus. Sometimes it can seem like a fishing line was cast and it hooks the tail of a whale and we find we are in for an indescribable experience. A whale’s tail is a spectacular piece of creation. There is nothing like seeing and hearing the slapping of a tail whale against the ocean water, but what must always be remembered is that in front of that tail is an enormous animal, and to hook it’s tail means that you will understand what Captain Ahab must have felt. The disciples hooked the tail of a whale and they had not yet seen the rest of the whale that was attached.

The story of Christianity is similar to hooking the tail of a whale – all you see is the tail and at some point you are going to get a glimpse of the enormity of what is in front of it. In a very real sense, Christianity is a fishing story, and you must choose to either hang on and go for an indescribable adventure, or to cut the line and return to

safety. That was the choice each of the disciples of Jesus had to make, and it is the same choice that must be made by each of us today.

Almost all of Jesus' disciples made their living with fishing, and Jesus comes and invites them to let that part of their life go and do something that was completely out of their experiences or thoughts – to change the world. They hooked a whale by the tail and decided, despite the fears they must have had, to not cut the line.

I had recently become the interim pastor of a congregation and one early Sunday during my time there, I included in my sermon some of the failures I have had in my life. Nothing terribly tragic, but stuff like spending two years in ninth grade, failing out of college on my first try, and getting fired from my first effort at being a pastor. It was near the end of my time with the congregation when a young man, who I did not even remember meeting, took me aside and told me that he was feeling terribly about his life and thought of himself as a mistake and complete failure. He was in church that Sunday when I shared some of my own failures and he said, “When I heard you talk about how you failed, I couldn't believe what I heard and I decided to keep on going.” Failure can be damaging. The fear of failure can be paralyzing. The disciples had every reason to be afraid, for they had hooked something they could not reel in and they had good reason to doubt their ability to hang on, but they kept going.

When you hook the tail of a whale, you are in for more than an exciting ride, you will be in real danger and you have reason to fear. Some turn to Jesus, the Church and Christianity for safety, but in truth, Jesus, the Church, and Christianity are filled with danger and you may well get injured. The Church and Jesus give no guarantee of safety to any person who accepts the work.

Rufus Jones, an American writer and Quaker, wrote in his book *The Radiant Life* about a little boy who continued to play on the deck of a ship while a storm was raging. When a passenger asked him if he wasn't afraid, the boy replied, “No, I'm not afraid. My father is the captain of the ship.”

“Oh”, others might say, “I am not really qualified to fish for whales”. For any who might say such, then I am going to burst your bubble – no one is qualified! Keep in mind, the disciples Jesus chose took no tests nor confirmed any qualifications in

character, intellect or ability. The disciples Jesus chose were unqualified to be anything other than fisherman.

No one is qualified to fish for whales. Jesus said to them and to all of us, “I need you. Trust me that you are going to be able to do what I place in front of you. Trust me that I will be right there with you when you are doing it. Trust me that regardless of how difficult or dangerous it will be, that you are being invited to do something that needs to be done to make this world into what it was meant to be.” The only answer Jesus wants to hear is “O.k., if you say so.”

Mother Teresa once wrote: *“I know God will not give me anything I can’t handle. I just wish that God didn’t trust me so much.”*

Christians cannot cut the line that takes us to another place! The fear of the ride and the unknown cannot be allowed to determine what we do. We know the name Ann Frank. She was 16 and died in a Nazi concentration camp after two year of hiding in a room, never being allowed to leave. Ann wanted to be a writer and kept a diary that is now acknowledged as an important literary work. Hear these words from her diary:

“I do not think of all the misery, but of the glory that remains. Go outside into the fields, nature and the sun, go out and seek happiness in yourself and in God. Think of the beauty that again and again discharges itself within and without you and be happy.”

It has been written of her: “God did not deliver her from ‘the wrath of my enemies,’ but the Lord did fulfill God’s purpose for her...her ambition to become a writer was fulfilled, thought not in the way she had planned, but was fulfilled nonetheless.” (great writers, suite 101.com/article). You might not be going to where you thought you would go, but everyone who is willing will go to where God needs you.

Trust me, Jesus says. I have great need for you. Trust me by not being concerned of how your life and work will unfold, but knowing that it will be of great importance to me. Trust me, for you have caught a whale by the tail and you will be going where you cannot now imagine. Trust me. Don’t cut the line, for I am the whale in front of the tail and what I ask of you is to hang on. Some of the disciples did just that. Will you?

Amen.