

Today's reading takes place in possibly one of the strangest confirmation classes ever. It's a little weird because it's by a lake. It's a little weird because there's probably a combination of smells going on—salt, fish, and maybe some sweat. It's really strange because it's so crowded that Jesus needs to hop on a boat so that He can see and teach everyone. He's surrounded by confirmands, the hearers of the Word, as catechumens were called back in the early Church. They're here to learn from this guy who has done great things, who teaches with authority like no other. They're curious about what He has to say, and they want to hear more about the kingdom of God, which has allegedly come near to them. And boy are they in for a surprise today.

They inch closer, pushed from behind as people want to get just a bit nearer so they can hear a bit clearer. On the hill there were the two brothers, sons of the blindman. With shaggy hair and dirty faces they were accustomed to knicking coins from those who walked by in order to feed their family. And just beyond them, certainly out of sight but she could pick up a few words was an old widow. Her husband passed just a few years ago now, yet you could still see some tear stains on her cheeks, clearing a path through the settled dust. Down the lake some other fishermen had dropped their nets after getting a haul—they'd clean them later, for now they wanted to hear what was gathering the crowd. These, and many more, from so many different stations in life, had gathered to take in some of this preaching, this proclamation of a kingdom where they seemed to have a place. This is what they heard.

But first, before He could really get into it, Jesus approached a group of dejected fishermen, guys with empty nets, and asked if they might take Him out a ways so that all who had drawn near could see and hear what He had for them.

Peter, the guy who owned one of the boats, offered his. Sullen because of a frustrating evening (which is putting it mildly) he was hoping Jesus might have some good news for him too. And they weren't strangers. They had met before, Peter had heard what He offered and was looking for something to change his outlook for this day.

So to the fishermen, and the parents, the kids, the workers, the widows and the divorced, the crippled and the dying, the confused, the forgotten, and those with regular old lives, they all got to hear the Word of God proclaimed to them, the kingdom of God painted before their very eyes, something they could hold onto while they awaited the coming Messiah.

As Jesus wrapped up His Words for the day, He turned to Peter, sitting on a makeshift stool staring intently at the master and He asked if they could head out into the deep and cast down the nets again.

Now Peter, His mind jumping through the reasons why this is not a good idea—fishing with nets is best at night when the fish can't see the trap they're running into and the fact that they're all exhausted, being the main two reasons—but he conceded... “But only because *you're* asking, Jesus. If it were anyone else, I'd say no and we'd be heading in for a nap. But at your words, master, sure.”

So they began rowing out passed the shallows and they cast out the freshly cleaned nets into the waters and within seconds, the men began to feel the tension in the nets. This nonsensical idea seemed to be working. So they began to pull in the nets, but the few men they had aboard were too few, too weak. Calling the other boat and men out, they managed to haul the splintering nets in, the fish nearly up to their knees in the boats.

But Peter hadn't noticed. Once the men couldn't pull up the nets, and after he had looked down to see that it was in fact fish in the nets and not a boulder or something, he hadn't taken his eyes off of Jesus. He had backed to the farthest side of the boat, pressing his legs against the edge. He was stuck there until Jesus, after observing the men pull the gargantuan haul in, looked at Peter, frozen in time and space, and walked towards him.

Immediately Peter fell to his knees and cried out “Depart from me, for I am a sinner Lord.”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, who had said anything about sin? Luke doesn't record that Peter had just held one of the other men's head under the water to count the fish and accidentally killed him.

We don't have a record of Jesus here preaching about how awful sin is and just how bad you're gonna get it if you're a sinner. What on earth made Peter's head jump to his sin?

He realized whose presence He was standing in. He had an Isaiah 6 moment, where he realized that this isn't even just some angel or fantastic prophet. This is the one who is *holy*. He is sinless and all-powerful. And that is the opposite of Peter.

Now, to the discerning ear, to the creative imagination, a person can learn from this text what really happens next. Peter is on his knees, his head probably pressed into the floor of the boat covered in flopping fish as he begs for the mercy of Christ, for Him to get out of Peter's presence. But Jesus, rather than skedaddling, throws out a net. The text doesn't say it in so many words. It uses different words, but it's what Jesus does.

From the boat, He throws out a net to wrap around Peter as He says "Do not fear."

This is what He's been doing the entire time. From the boat, Jesus has been casting out a net onto the shore, to those who have sinned and have been held hostage at the mercy of sin—theirs and others. To those who know nothing about the kingdom of God He proclaims it to them, not as something they must attain to but as something they must seek out by the mercy of another. They don't know how to get in yet—not until after the crucifixion will it be made clear— but Jesus in His proclamation sends out the net of the Gospel and catches—some?

We don't know whom He caught. The kids or the adults, the workers or the widows, the murderers, adulterers, liars, thieves, the sick or the dying? We don't know who was captured in His Gospel net, but we know it was thrown at them all, seeking to save them from the deep, from the water they are drowning in and yet feel all too comfortable.

But we do know that He caught Simon Peter. His absolution of Peter—do not fear—changes Him. No longer must He identify as a sinful man but as a forgiven one—a still sinning saint. No longer is his job to catch fish in the dark to make sure that he can live and take care of his family but he is to go

out and catch men—alive. He is to bring them the news of life that they may be truly alive just as he is now.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, today we have heard about the start of the Church, where Jesus lays it out for us. He preached from a boat, which is His Church. From this boat, His Words, His Gospel, His net, is cast out indiscriminately. Some will hear, others will not. Some might remember at a later date and be caught up again and brought in. But all who are caught up in this net are gathered into this same boat in which Christ stands and where we are safe. Safe from the storms of life, safe from the dangers on the shore and the terrors swimming beneath us, the evils living where we once dwelt. And as the fish in the boat, we are given Jesus' net. We are given the same Gospel words which captured us and keeps us and we are given more than enough, so we throw it overboard as well.

To us He has given this reliable net of the Gospel, unchanging and unwavering. It is faithful to be cast out, no matter which fish is holding it. Jesus was pretty amazing to draw in the crowds to hear, but we don't need to worry if we've only got a confirmation class, a shore filled with only one. Whether it catches hundreds like on Pentecost or simply a few, as is more often the case, it is faithful to grab hold and frees from the world which once held them and us captive. This net repeats "Do not be afraid" as it forgives you, and it latches hold.

And it holds tight. If we the church had to get in here on our own efforts, we'd have nothing to hold us in when the winds and the waves and the devil himself buffet against the boat. Our own righteousness certainly wouldn't keep us secure.

And the net holds others tight too. If it had been up to our own hands and words to gather and entice the fish of the sea, it would be our job to keep them here, and we'd never be able to hold them tight enough, let alone worry about which person is holding us secure.

But this net, after it pulls us out of our sin and death, it tangles us up in it, so whether the winds are blowing us about or even if a catch we're hoping to pull in is dragging us overboard, the Gospel

holds us. And we must keep hearing it so that we're constantly woven into it, as if there are leashes coming from the net to attach to our belt loops and our knuckles.

Here and today, my brothers and sisters in Christ, this net is being cast over all of you hearers of the Word. We have already, like Peter, recognized whose presence we're in. In the Invocation we remembered the God who has created us, purchased and redeemed us, and sanctifies and keeps us, this God has called us and is with us today. With that in mind, because we remain sinners, we quickly followed with Peter's confession of "we're not worthy to be in this place with you" in our confession.

Then in the absolution, in the readings, now in the sermon and soon in the Lord's supper, later in the benediction He Himself casts the net and says "Do not fear. This kingdom I proclaim, the one you long for, is yours."

And as you hear in faith, as He enlightens you to the Father's love for you for the sake of Christ—His life, death, and resurrection, you are brought in for the first time, maybe, and He catches you if you're slipping overboard, and He keeps you safe in the boat. And He gives you more than enough Gospel net to satisfy your new identity. Now you've got a piece of the net to toss overboard, you've got the forgiveness of Christ and His coming kingdom to proclaim. So, from this place, we all go to catch men alive.

Amen.