

SERMON  
First Lutheran Church  
Aitkin, Minnesota

Luke 5:1-11  
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen  
January 22, 2017

### **KIDS' MESSAGE**

Kids, just like what you might sometimes hear on TV, the things that I'm about to tell you, I don't want you to try at home, okay? Okay! Once, when I was little, I poked a hole in each of the tires on my older brother and sister's bikes! Once, I used an old arrow to poke a hole in the screen on our front door. Once, I put a "For Sale" sign on a tree in our front yard. Once, I broke my brother's model cars. Once, I ran through the door into my sister's room, without knocking, and saw her naked. Once I started a campfire in our basement! And then I turned seven!

Wow, my parents should have gotten rid of me! They should have hung a "For Sale" sign around my neck when I was a little kid. Do you think they got rid of me? No. Why not? You're right; they kept me because they loved me too much to let me go. They loved me so much that they hung in there through all of the trouble I made and they kept working to help me to grow up to have the best and happiest life that I could.

Do you sometimes do bad things? Do your parents ever think about getting rid of you? No! They love you too much and they are trying really hard to help you to grow up to have the best life that you can. That's why they've brought you to church with them today. They want you to know that you are a child of God.

Do God's children do bad things sometimes too? I'm afraid so. I do. Does God sometimes think about getting rid of us? No! God may not like some of the things that we do, but God is always trying to love and care for us anyway. God is always trying to help us to have the best and most joyful lives that we can have. When Jesus died on the cross for us, he showed us just how far our loving God is willing to go in order to help us to be God's children, safely in God's care, now and forever. God loves you so much! Do you love God? Yes! That love going back and forth between God and us is very strong! There's nothing stronger in all the world! Thanks be to God. Amen.

## **ADULT MESSAGE**

When people, who are not a part of the church, think about God, what do you suppose they see? What is the public view of God and the church today? Do you suppose they see the church like the “**Jesus person**” who told me that I wasn’t “**born again**” because I didn’t speak in tongues? Or could they see the church as the place where if you don’t think the same as the “**Evangelical Right**” that you can’t be a Christian? Back in the days of Jesus, the Apostle Paul (Saul) was convinced that he was doing God’s will by going around and arresting Christians so that they could be stoned to death for their faith. What they believed was different than what he believed so they were blasphemers and should be killed.

A few years back I heard Pastor Kelly Fryer, author of “**Reclaiming the ‘L’ Word**,” speak about our Lutheran Christian faith. She had seen a billboard out along the freeway. It showed a **wall of flames** on the bottom and above that was a phrase that read, “**No God = No Future.**” “**Turn or burn,**” is that the kind of a God people “**out there**” see today, a God waiting to toast us if we don’t get things straight by “**the end?**” That would surely make me “**love**” God... How about you?

Well, what sort of people did Jesus, “**God with us,**” hang out with way back then? Let’s start with the man that people would have thought was the biggest sinner of his day, **Zacchaeus**, the chief tax collector. He, no doubt, was a liar, a cheat, a traitor who sold out to the enemy Roman occupying army. He surely didn’t attend worship. He wasn’t allowed to. And Zacchaeus probably didn’t believe in or pray to God anymore either. He was the little guy who climbed a tree to see if he could get a glimpse of Jesus. Jesus saw him, had even been looking for him it turned out. Jesus could have thrown the book/Bible at him! What did Jesus actually do? Jesus invited himself into Zacchaeus’ house and ate with him. Zacchaeus was so overwhelmed by Jesus’ acceptance of him, that he went wild and promised to pay back four times anything that he’d stolen by collecting too much tax money from the people. And he promised to give away half of his wealth to the poor. Is that crazy? Was he trying to “**get himself saved?**” Or, does “**God’s love change people?**”

**Peter**, let's look at him next. He was an ordinary fisherman, probably rough and tumble, not a bad fellow, perhaps. Jesus used Peter's boat as a platform for preaching to the crowds that were longing for good news, a hopeful word. When Jesus was done speaking, he instructed Peter to put out into the deeper water for a catch of fish. Professional fisherman, Peter told Jesus that it was useless since they'd just come in from having no luck. Nevertheless, Peter said that he'd do what Jesus said and they ended up being swamped with all the fish they caught! It was immediately clear to Peter that Jesus must be pretty close to God, so he cried out, "**Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!**" God was seen to be so perfect that no ordinary human could survive being in God's presence. Peter did.

Do you know the rest of Peter's story? He's the one who was always putting his foot in his mouth, too quick to speak. He's the one who acted before he thought things through. He's the one who ended up denying Jesus three times when Jesus needed him most. Jesus should have just dumped Peter then and there and looked for someone better to call as a disciple. But, Jesus didn't, he responded to fisherman Peter's fears far in advance by saying in today's Gospel text, "**Don't be afraid, from now on you'll be catching people!**"

**Zacchaeus** was pretty bad. **Peter** was just your average "Joe." What about **Saul**? He was a super Jew, a Pharisee, a firm believer in God. He knew the scriptures front to back. And he had it figured that Jesus, now dead and gone, had been an enemy of God. So, all those Christians who still believed that Jesus was the living Son of God needed to be arrested and killed. **Saul, later the Apostle Paul**, was literally killing Christians! Jesus came to him too. Jesus could have thrown the book/Bible at him. Jesus should have killed Saul on the spot! Did he? No, Jesus blinded Saul, set him on his can, and then through another courageous Christian, **Ananias**, helped Saul to be able to truly "**see**" the **will of God for his life**. God's will for Saul was **not to take life from folks, but to give life to folks**. Next thing you know, Saul is proclaiming to everyone who will listen that "**Jesus is the Son of God!**" Next thing you know, Saul gets his name put on the death list of those other religious people who thought that they were protecting God. . .

**Zacchaeus**, **Peter** and **Saul** – all three men were loved and forgiven into Jesus' kingdom. Zacchaeus was loved in. Peter was invited in. Saul was popped in the nose and carried in. Does God drive us into God's family, or love us in? Does God include those who are "**good enough**" or those who are "**forgiven**?" Can the law "**force us**" to believe or are we "**set free**" to believe? Do we "**love**" in order to "**earn**" something, or do we "**love because God first loved us**?" Does God "**whack us**" alongside with the Bible, or does God "**embrace us**" with God's Living Word and the body of Christ (other Christian people)?

I am so thankful that my parents introduced me to a God who loves me and all people so mightily, intimately and faithfully, that I am joyfully motivated to love God back from my heart and my mind and my soul, as best as I can. Will your kids be able to grow into adulthood and then have learned, **not only the rules for how to live**, but even more, how to **live a life of love that needs no rules**? Will they know that you loved them all along? Will they be able to love you back? Will they know that God loves them more than anyone else ever could? Will they be able to love God back?

So many of us gathered here in this place, today, were introduced to an angry, harsh God who sat in constant judgment and was to be feared lest you spend an eternity in hell. Do you want to sit there and hang onto that view of God? Do you want to stop at the place where coming to church, donating money, and trying to be good are just your necessary insurance policy against going to hell, your advertising for the success of your business, your keeping your spouse happy, your making sure that your kids "get religion?"

The "**law**," which we find in the Bible, is, first of all, needed to **keep us alive** in a violent and chaotic world. The law is needed to keep us alive at least long enough to be able to meet Jesus where we can find true life. Then, the law is needed to "**kill us**" – to show us that we aren't, can't be, never will be "**good enough**" to be able to enjoy the kind of life that God longs to give to us here and now, not to mention "**forever!**" We can't be "good enough," deserving enough. In fact, God should "dump us" right now, but instead, God patiently keeps coming down,

always coming down, to give us, day by day, the free gift of grace, which comes to us as faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

As God's people, we are loved and accepted just as we are, but God is not willing to leave us there. Love changes people. God's love changed Zacchaeus, Peter and Saul. It daily moves to change you and me. God's love moves daily to set us free from bondage to chemicals, work-aholism, money, sickness, prejudice, depression, violence. God's love moves to carry us in God's direction instead of that of the world. God's love moves to empower us to reach out to a hurting and needy world with the good news that God has faithfully loved and cared for us and will do the same for them. . .

Saul/Paul started out killing Christians. Once God's love, compassion and grace touched his life, Paul went on to write much of the New Testament. In his writings, Paul taught:

1. Every good gift, including our salvation, comes to us by God's grace, free and undeserved.
2. God's love sets us free to love God back and to care for people and the world.
3. Now, instead of worrying about measuring up or about taking total care of ourselves, we can thankfully work at trying to **lead a life reflective of God's deep and amazing love for us.**

Do you believe that? Do you believe that you can "**reflect God's love?**" **Peter**, the fisherman, did some writing to the early Christians too. He wrote, ". . . **You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light.**" (1 Peter 2:9) Jesus never stopped loving Peter, even when Peter denied Jesus three times. And when Jesus rose from the dead and came back, he put Peter right to work at leading the mission of **Jesus' fishers of people.** Are you a fisher of people? Is somebody waiting to hear good news from you?

How'd you come to this place? How do you know God? Did someone "**scare the hell out of you?**" Or, did someone "**love the life into you?**" Or, are you **somewhere along the journey?** What would it be like if we really expected something to happen in our lives, in our church, because of the love and welcome that we have been given by Jesus? Has God's love embraced you? Have you been forgiven, set free from the burdens that have weighed you down? Is God moving through you to embrace, love and forgive someone else in your life? **God's love changes people.** God's love is **changing you and me right here and now.** And **God's love will be faithfully at work in our lives and world again tomorrow and forever.** God is not going to stop loving us. Then, sometimes, maybe just once in a while, we may manage to reflect even just a glimpse of God's love to the people around us. And that will be enough. Thanks be to God. Amen.