

Simon Peter should be elated. But instead, he is disgusted with himself. He has just made a “killing” in the fishing industry. So many fish that the nets are breaking. Yet instead of jumping up in celebration, he falls to his knees in agonizing sorrow. *“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!”* What causes this pitiful cry? And why now as he and his partners haul in the biggest catch of fish anyone there has ever seen?

Here's how it is. Jesus had given two words to Simon. The first was a word of command. The second, a word of promise. Simon acted on the first word, but he did not believe the second word. *“Put out into the deep and let down your nets,”* was the word of command from Jesus. And Simon did. Yet not without putting in his two cents worth first. *“Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at Your word I will let down the nets.”* *Because You say so, because You say to do it, I'll do it, but that is the only reason.*

Simon heard the second word, the word of promise. Jesus attached it to the word of command. *“Let down your nets,”* He commanded Simon, *“for a catch.”* Here is the promise. *“Put out into the deep and let down your nets...because there will be a catch of fish there for you.”*

Simon heard this word, but he did not believe it. Had he believed it, he would not have replied to Jesus as he did. He, instead, would have eagerly put out into the deep to let down his nets in the full assurance that he would draw in a catch of fish.

Oh, he still went out into the deep. He still let down his nets. But he acted without joy, without expectation. For he did not act on Jesus' word of promise, but only on His word of command.

Jesus has two words for you and me just as He did for Simon. He gives us His word of command, and He gives us His word of promise. And just as He did for Simon, Jesus attaches His word of promise to His word of command.

He commands baptism. And to this word He attaches His promise, the promise of the Holy Spirit, faith, forgiveness, life, and salvation. He does the same with His Holy Supper. Jesus commands us to make full use of it, and with the promise of forgiveness and every blessing, for this life and for the life to come, attached to it.

Jesus commands us to hear His words faithfully. To read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Word of Truth. Yet this is no bare command. He attaches to this command the great promises of life and salvation.

But we are like Simon. Acting on the word of command, perhaps because this has been our habit, yet not truly believing the word of promise.

Here we are today like Simon. You have taken your boat out here into the deep waters and let down your nets. You are sitting in the pew, your ears in the posture of listening. But are you acting in this way because this is Jesus' command, or do you truly expect to receive a catch of fish?

The fish came to Simon's net because Jesus' promise put them there. It's not because Simon was such a great fisherman. And it's not because he acted in faith, believing he would catch fish. His faith, or lack of it in this case, did not put the fish in the net. Jesus' promise put them there.

And the same is true for you. Your faith does not put forgiveness, life, and salvation into the Holy Sacraments. Jesus' promise puts them there to be received by you in faith.

And so, we bring our little ones into the deep waters of baptism at Jesus' command, and expecting a great catch of fish, for Jesus will do for our little ones according to His promise. And then the months and years go by. Like Simon, we spend all night fishing in these waters, but we see little results. Just the opposite, we see our little ones grow up and quite often leave the church. We throw up our hands in frustration. And we may still come to these waters with our nets, yet not because we believe Jesus' promise anymore, but only because this is His command. And we lose our joy. We come without expectation. We, rather, expect to receive little to nothing.

Oh, how we need to cry with Simon, "*Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!*" What has happened to our faith? How many of us have given up on Jesus' promises? How many of us come to these waters without expectation? And how many have even stopped acting on Jesus' word of command, not even fishing in these waters anymore because they, we, have fished all night and caught nothing?

Is Jesus not testing us? Is He not using the so-called pandemic to see if we really are faithful to Him? Does He not use disappointments in life to bring us to our knees in repentant sorrow? And since when have His promises ever failed to bring a catch of fish?

"*Do not be afraid,*" Jesus said to Simon, and also to you. "*From now on you will be catching men.*" Your loved ones, those for whom you pray, those men, women, and children who need to be caught.

And Jesus begins with you. He catches you with His grace. He forgives you. He forgives your faithlessness. And He uses you to catch others.

Jesus did not depart from Simon. Nor does He depart from you. He stands by you in His promises. And so, keep coming out here into the deep waters. Keep letting down your nets. But don't just act on Jesus' command. Believe His promises. They are for you. He who caught you for salvation will fill your nets with a great catch because His promises never fail. Amen.