

“Follow and Fish”
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Luke 5:1-11

It had been a long night for Simon and his fishing crew. Throw the nets out, drag with the boat, haul the nets in. Time and time again, they came up empty. As dawn approached, they headed for shore, disappointed perhaps even disgusted by a fruitless night of labor.

As they sat cleaning their nets, a teacher came along with a large crowd in tow. “I’m Jesus,” he said, “Do you mind if I borrow your boat?” Well, it was a great honor to help someone so esteemed as Jesus, so they readily agreed, and Jesus got into the boat, and they put out a little way from the shore, so the crowd would not crush him.

From there, Jesus taught. Luke offers us no record of what he said, but when he finished, Jesus said to Simon, “Let’s go fishing,” and everybody groaned, “The fish have fled. We’ve been out here all night. It’s hopeless.” But they relented, because teachers like Jesus were wise and should be given the benefit of the doubt.

We know the rest of the story, how they hauled up so many fish that their nets nearly broke; how the fish filled their boat and another boat until they both began to sink under the weight. It was an astonishing catch, and what it meant for them was food on their tables and money in their pockets and bragging rights. Talk about a fish story. This would likely have been the largest single haul of fish in memory in their community.

Of course, not all of them were ready to boast. Simon somehow sensed that it was the presence of Jesus that had made this marvelous thing happen. He was humbled and scared and insisted that Jesus get away from him, “for I am a sinful man!” Peter

declared. But Jesus would have none of that. “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” In other words, you ain’t seen nothing yet.

This story is not so much about a miraculous catch of fish as it is about the recruitment of the first disciples of Jesus. They were chosen, not because of any obvious innate capacities they possessed. In fact, we never find out exactly why Jesus chose these men instead of others. Certainly, there was no shortage of folks to choose from. An immense crowd had gathered by the shore, so great that Jesus was obligated to hop into a boat. But whatever the cause, Jesus invited these fishermen to join him on his journey in a special role.

They accepted with surprising quickness. According to Luke, “they left everything and followed him.” One presumes that even the great catch of fish was left in the boats. That which had so delighted them only moments before now meant nothing to them, because they felt a higher summons that drew them away from what had been, up to that point, the daily rhythm of their very lives. It is hard to imagine the clarity of insight and the intensity of feeling that must have motivated the disciples to make such great sacrifices to follow Jesus.

However, the summons that lured the original disciples away from their nets was never meant for them alone. Though they hold pride of place as the first to follow Jesus with such utter dedication, the summons echoes still, down through the centuries, to us today. We may resist, insisting, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful person!” But the retort of Jesus remains the same, “Give me a break. You think I didn’t already know that? Besides, looking around, I don’t see anything but sinners.”

Yes, we too have been chosen to follow Jesus closely, and each day, we need to choose anew to continue following, through prayer and study and worship and service. And in the midst of all that we do to follow Jesus, we must always remember the purpose of our calling. “From now on you will be catching people.” Catching people. That is our purpose.

And that’s the really unnerving part about following Jesus. It’s one thing to follow with the crowd from place to place and soak up the wise teaching and witness the amazing miracles, but it’s quite another to follow Jesus as a disciple and participate in the process of making new Christians and making old Christians even better Christians. But that is what each of us is called to do, each in his or her own way.

Some may deny that, and it’s your choice. But if you’ve ever been fishing, you know how satisfying it can be to reel them in as fast as you can bait your hook. Perhaps a few of us here have even shared the pleasure of hauling in a net so full that it twitched under the weight of the catch. Watching a bass tournament on TV may be nice, but nothing beats bringing them for real yourself.

For those who accept the invitation to become fishers of people, what do we need to know? Well, first of all, no Jesus, no fish. No Jesus, no fish. The presence of Jesus is the only thing that will attract people into the boat. We must be ever mindful of that. We live in a world that constantly tempts us to lose focus and divert our energies toward less worthy pursuits, like controversies or distracting entertainments. But our sole intent here should be revealing and manifesting the presence of Jesus.

I think we do that quite well. People consistently tell me that they come here and can feel the love of the Jesus flowing through our community. That’s a great blessing,

one we should celebrate and treasure and nurture at all costs. As we move forward, day by day, it is important to remember, no Jesus, no fish. We can bring people into the boat only if Jesus remains at the heart of who we are as a community of faith.

Second, those who accept the invitation to become fishers of people need to realize that it may get a bit scary at times. The abundance Jesus brings can nearly swamp us. I'm sure many of us remember the Sundays not long ago when there was hardly room to breathe in our historic chapel. Even now in our larger space, we can sometimes feel disoriented by the large number of fresh faces. The ideas and energies coursing through the parish have been multiplied many times by these bright and inspired new members.

Despite the delight we take in all this change and newness, the sheer greatness of it all can often give us a sinking feeling, like we're going to be submerged beneath this awesome miracle God is working in our midst. The nets, which once contained with relative ease what God gave us, now stretch to the breaking point, and we wonder if the nets, so important to our survival, will endure.

Yes, there is great anxiety that can come with Jesus as your fishing buddy. Life becomes unpredictable, impractical, and occasionally downright frightening. But that is life with Jesus: it's free; it's exciting; it's risky, but it's rarely ever boring. Life with Jesus goes beyond our daily routines. It can lift us out of our ruts and show us new horizons of thought and feeling, if only we accept the invitation and follow Jesus and fish with him.

Third, when we fish with Jesus, we often need to drop our nets into deep water. Growing up in Kentucky, we often went to Lake Malone for a day of fishing, and invariably my dad would guide our little boat into a little cove sprinkled with partially

submerged boulders and fallen trees. This was always a nightmare for me. Dad, being well practiced in how to cast a line, could place his lure right where he wanted it. Despite his best efforts to teach me how, I spent most of my time jostling my line out the snags instead. But that's where we fished, there in the shallows, because that's where the fish were most concentrated. They came to the shallows for warmth and food and for the shelter of those maze-like branches. I always wondered what it would be like to cast my line in the depths of that lake, and from time to time, I'd move to the other side of the boat and try it. Never caught a thing.

The temptation we often face is to fish only in the shallows, where the easy pickings often lie, where there are already people hungry and seeking for food, for God, and we should fish there. But we need to also remember that Jesus encourages us to drop our nets into deep water; into the dark, cold, deep water where the lost and the forgotten and the outcast languish. Jesus calls us to take the extra trouble to reach out and bring in those who have been abandoned and neglected. Jesus calls us to reach out and bring in those who have been poisoned and bruised by a preaching of the Gospel that emphasizes the letter of the Law rather than the Spirit of love.

So let's fish in the depths, not just in the shallows. Don't be afraid, despite the dangers inherent in following Jesus. But most of all, just say, "Yes." Say "Yes," and accept the invitation to follow Jesus and fish with him. Fish for people. We've got good bait, and there are so many drowning in a sea of loneliness and despair, drowning in a sea of fear and hatred, a sea of confusion and ignorance. It's our job to get them into the boat. That's what we're here for. As a friend is fond of saying, we are not here to be "a self-licking ice cream cone." Our primary purpose goes beyond just us, to those outside

the boundaries of our current community. That's what being a disciple is about. It's about harboring the attractive presence of Jesus, and bringing people into the boat, where they can die to their old selves and be reborn anew and then become fishers like us. So all hands on deck. Ready your nets. It's time to go fishing for people with Jesus. Amen.