

What Are You Fishing For?

Luke 5:1-11

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

It's no secret that getting people to volunteer for anything these days is difficult. People just don't join anything like they used to. It doesn't matter whether you're talking about joining the country club, or the church, or civic organizations, like Rotary International or the Boy or Girls Scouts, getting people to volunteer is more difficult today. It's easy enough for the church to put out an S.O.S. announcing the need for more teachers in the Sunday School, or volunteers to help with visiting the home-bound, or leaders to go on a retreat with students in middle school – but rarely is the result throngs of people signing up. Announcing the necessary needs is not sufficient in getting people to volunteer.

You have to recruit volunteers, and that means personal contact. A dozen phone calls, or visits, will produce a greater percentage return than an announcement in the Community Connections church newsletter that goes out to thousands. You need a specific request for a specific task and then people often will step up to the plate. Sometimes unexpected people get involved, sure. And you're going to get some polite 'maybes' and some who don't follow through, but you also will discover gold when people say, "I've been waiting for a chance to serve Christ in this church, but nobody ever asked me before."

This story in Luke tells us that Jesus, who has been working alone with great success, (everybody was "amazed" and great crowds gathered to hear what he had to say) is now looking for a few good people to assist him. Peter and his business partners had been working all night trying to catch something and came up empty. Anyone who has ever worked in sales knows the feeling. Someone once said the reason for daytime television is for sales people who can't handle one more rejection. We're all fishing for something and sometimes we just come up empty. It can be discouraging.

In the classic story *Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville, Father Mapple enters the chapel drenched by a raging storm outside. (This week we have all been concerned for family members in the Carolinas who suffered the landfall of Hurricane Florence with all its wind and rain.) Father

Mapple slowly removes his wet overcoat, hat, and boots, and “quietly approached the pulpit.” It is described as a “lofty one” and since regular stairs would have taken too much room in the space available, a side ladder like those on board ships was used. To steady oneself as one climbed the ladder, rope railings were provided. Father Mapple stopped briefly before ascending the ladder to deliver one of the more famous sermons in American literature, a sermon about Jonah and the whale (one of the more famous fish stories in the Bible as well). In his description of the pulpit, Melville describes it as looking like the bow of a ship. “What could be more full of meaning? For the pulpit is ever this world’s foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world,” he writes. “Yes, the world’s a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow.”¹ One picks up a sense of the influence of the church and preaching in American history. The Word of God has always had power when preached faithfully.

One of the most enduring images of the Christian faith is that of a boat or ship. We speak of “fellowship” among those within the church, literally meaning a connection with those who are on the same vessel. This sanctuary itself is designed like an upside down ship; an ark, if you will, of safety to provide safe passage in the midst of the storms of life. And not only has the church understood itself to be a ship making its way through history, it also has been given a task to seek out and to retrieve the lost; to not seek its own safety, primarily, but to fish, to seek out and to find those who are floundering in the sea of life and get them on board.

The story of Peter’s calling to discipleship, retold here in this New Testament text, has provided Melville and others with an understanding of the role of preaching and discipleship in service to the Lord Jesus Christ. Simon Peter, the disciple, receives the call to ministry in this text and leaves behind one kind of fishing for another. Apparently fishing and ministry have much in common. I guess we’re all fishing in life for one thing or another. We’re all searching for something we have not yet hauled into our boat. We still yearn for something more, some deeper and richer experience of life, a more significant life, and more fulfilling life. We seek to be at peace with ourselves and with God. Like Peter, we know what it is to search all night and come up empty. The point of the text is not that Jesus helps Peter (and us) to more productively search for meaning, rather the meaning comes when we respond to the claim of God upon us. The fulfillment of God’s will is that he waits upon our will to choose Him above all else. Jesus breaks the pattern of Peter’s life and invites an embrace of a different destiny that feels unrealized. Peter moves

1 (Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* Penguin Classics p.132-134)

from an observer to a participant in the unfolding drama of God's intervention in the world in Jesus Christ. We, too, are invited to embrace a different destiny by this same Lord.

Luke's Gospel is the only one to tell the story of Peter coming to faith and being charged by Christ in this way. Mark and Matthew tell the story as if Jesus just came walking along one day and said, "Come and follow me," that then they left their boats, and nets, and families. John's Gospel tells a similar story about a miraculous catch of fish but at the end of the book, it is not Peter's call to ministry but his rehabilitation following his denial.

Peter was invited to go deeper. He had worked all night fishing and came up empty. When Jesus told him to throw his nets into the deep, he did it! He didn't argue with him that there were no fish to be had, though his experience told him otherwise. He protested mildly but concluded Jesus sounds like he knows what he's talking about. Peter trusted him enough to take the action the Lord was calling him to do. He suspended what he thought he knew, in order to try something he must have thought was a fool's errand.

It is interesting to note that in this story of the calling of Peter and the first disciples, Luke uses the same Greek word for "deep water" which, translated in Genesis I, refers to the primeval sea over which the spirit of God moves at the time of creation. Unfocused, the sea personifies chaos but harnessed by the Word of God, it is energy for life.

So Peter, who has spent fruitless hours in his chosen profession of fishing against the forces of chaos, trying to "eek out" an existence, now encounters the one who speaks and brings order to the chaos; the one who invites those who feel unqualified to participate in the fishing industry of the Church of Jesus Christ.

We are not all called to preach the Gospel like Peter, but we are all called to leave behind our anxious and fruitless fishing. We may not be called to give up our livelihood like Peter but we are called to listen to the Lord and respond to the invitation of Christ, thus allowing him into our boat – into our life – and then responding to what he tells us, even when we think we know more. We may not all be called to become evangelists but we can take our place in the vessel, known as the Church, that is plowing its way through history. We can have fellowship with one another and listen for God's Word to us. We can join together in the search for those who are floundering in a sea of chaos and invite them to join us here. It's not that we are more qualified

than they are. We have simply found a ship that is sea-worthy and provides safe passage through the storms of life and over the deep waters of chaos – and there's a captain in Jesus Christ who can guide us forward.

Life can overwhelm any of us. God's greatest gifts are not out of our reach! Though our own efforts may have come up empty, the Lord can show us where to throw our nets and how to go deeper in our faith. We may have concluded that there are no fish in whatever lake we're fishing in; that what is really needed is another fishing hole, another family to belong to, or another partner, or church, or job, or another community in which to live. It may be that all you really need is for the Lord to show you where to cast your net deeper — right where you are.

The life of faith requires that we go deeper into the mystery of living, and leave behind our easy explanations and superficial understandings. Jesus once said to some discouraged fishermen, "Launch out into the deep and let down your nets. The problem is you're playing it safe in shallow water. Don't be afraid of the chaos. I bring order to the chaos of life. It is life unharnessed and unfocused, pointless, meaningless, and frenzied. It is force, power, life but formless and void. Put out into the deep! The deep is where life is." And though reluctant, they let down their nets and hauled in so much it about swamped their boats.

Douglas John Hall makes a distinction between "causes" and "reasons" for our Christian faith. ²Causes include the fact that we were born in America in the twentieth century. Many of us were originally caused to be Christians by our families and culture. But causes are not enough. "It takes more than social conditioning to make people Christians in any genuine and lasting sense of the term."³ Fewer and fewer people find inherited Christianity reason enough to stay Christian. Peter's faith was not caused by his cultural surroundings. He had a reason for his faith. In his own experience, Peter responded to the urging of Christ to go deeper and trust in him.

Quite possibly, God in Christ is inviting you to do the same thing today — to explore the reasons for your faith instead of the causes, and to trust in the Lord to show you where to direct your efforts for more productive living. Launch out into the chaos of life that frightens you. Put

² Hall, Douglas, John. *Why Christian?* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 1998) p. 14.

³ Ibid. p. 15

down your nets. You may just find a reason to say, like Peter, “Lord, I’m not a religious person, but I’m tired of coming up empty all the time. And I don’t want to miss your greatest gifts. Show me, Lord, how to fish and show me how to take my place in this vessel known as your church. It’s the only sea-worthy vessel that can handle the deep. I’m willing to invest my time, and talents, and treasure here – for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Let it get personal with you. You never know what you might find when you get out in the deep over your head. Amen.