

“Fishing Lessons”  
Luke 5:1-11

I don't know anything about fishing. As a boy who grew-up in the suburbs and never lived close to a body of water, going fishing was never on the list of possible activities for me during the summer or on weekends. None of my siblings or friends fished; nor did either parent, which makes it no surprise I did not pick-up that hobby on my own. Mind you, I have always enjoyed the results of other people's fishing, but my time with the children a few moments ago was the closest I have come to that food-securing activity itself since my days as a Boy Scout. While some of you might view that admission as a character flaw, I simply want to be clear up front about my personal history as we have just heard a Biblical scene that is all about fishing.

Before we turn to that account in depth, let me name an unusual aspect to it. All four of the gospels tell of Jesus calling his first disciples to follow and three of those books describe it as being one of the first thing Jesus did. John has his own sequence of events, but Matthew and Mark, use a shared plot. As they both tell of a day when Jesus walks up to two fishermen who, as far as the Bible records, he has never met before, invites them to follow him and they immediately drop their nets and go. Walking on, he encounters two other fishermen and the same events occur. Those accounts have often left me to wonder what it was in Jesus' demeanor or voice that would cause those men and eight more later on to leave their career behind in a spur-of-the-moment decision. Luke's account is different.

If you were to look back over the chapter that precedes our text, you will see a Jesus who has launched his ministry alone. He is teaching in synagogues, casting out demons, and healing all kinds of physical ailments, including a high fever in the mother-in-law of Simon, the man we will come to know as Simon Peter. Just prior to our reading, Jesus seems worn down by the pace as he departs at daybreak to find a secluded place, but the crowds track him down and want him to stay. He replies “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also” and moves on. It's after all of those events that our passage begins.

Luke tells of a day when Jesus is standing next to the lake of Gennesaret; another name for that body of water is the Sea of Galilee. The crowd is beginning to press in on him, eager to hear the Word of God when Jesus spots two boats on the shoreline and fishermen who are washing their nets. Without asking, he steps into the boat that belong to Simon and then requests that the fisherman put the boat out a short distance into the water. Jesus will need that help for he has chosen the boat as a platform for speaking to the crowd and thus needs someone to control the drift of the vessel if it is to be effective as a pulpit. Simon agrees, likely as an act of gratitude for Jesus having helped his mother-in-law recover from the fever.

When he finishes teaching, Jesus turns to Simon and say “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” The man is reluctant, but does as requested and soon the haul of fish is so large the nets start to break. Simon signals to James and John, two brothers who are partners, to help. As they pull their boat aside and start bringing in the catch, both vessels start to sink. Simon falls to his knees. “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” he exclaims, but Jesus replies “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” After the boats arrive safely at the shore, Luke tells us that the men “left everything and followed him.”

Unlike all the other gospels, the invitation from Jesus to follow him after he has developed a large following and offered a sign of his power. The quick acceptance those fishermen in that setting makes more sense to me. That moment also provides the first of many times in the years to come when Jesus will use everyday images in his teaching to make a larger

point, in this case telling those fishermen they will soon be catching people. It's a wonderful scene with all kind of themes to ponder, but I'd like us to focus on its fishing lessons.

From those who know something about fishing, I learned that the best time for such work on the Sea of Galilee is at night for that is when the fish are feeding. During the day, the fish hide under the rocks. Furthermore, the best spots on that lake for fishing are near the shore as fish congregate around the streams and springs at the edge where oxygen-rich fresh water flows into the lake. Perhaps that is true about fishing in other places, too, yet in our passage, it is late in the day when Jesus urges Simon to cast his nets into the deep waters.

Kenneth Bailey, a Presbyterian minister who spent much of his life living in the Middle East names the reaction one would expect from that fisherman. "Peter was exhausted," Bailey says. "He and his partners had fished all night and caught nothing...The very idea that a landlubber from the highlands of Nazareth, who has never wet a line should presume to tell a seasoned fishing captain what to do is preposterous. The fish can see and avoid the nets during the day, but they feed at night. The order to launch into the deeps in broad daylight is ridiculous!" (Bailey, Kenneth. *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2008, p. 141).

Jesus' suggestion to Simon does evoke the kind of response Bailey imagines, though the fisherman is gentler in his words. "Master," he says "we have worked all night long but have caught nothing." That answer could have been the end of the story. He could have continued "and now I'm going home to rest" and later said to his wife "You remember that man who helped your mother get better? You won't believe what he asked me to do today!"

Yet the story didn't end there, for after naming an unsuccessful night of fishing, Simon goes on to add "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." It was not an answer brimming with trust. It was not a reply that voiced any expectation that things would be different. They were the words of a man who had nothing to lose. Yet because he spoke those words and proceeded to do what Jesus asked of him, Simon's life was forever changed.

So what are the fishing lessons for us? More particularly, what is Jesus asking you or me to do on this day? Given the temperatures forecast for later today, I'm guessing it isn't to go out for some literal fishing effort after this service; at least that will not be the lesson that I choose to take away! Still, I wouldn't be surprised if there aren't other questions his is posing to us.

As perhaps he is asking you to trust that he is in charge and to let go of your worry about unsettling things happening in your life today. Perhaps he's seeking for you take the challenges that you accurately see in your family or this church, your workplace or our nation, and to consider that maybe the solution is not just for others to change or step up, but for you to accept your part in making it different. Perhaps he is asking you to draw closer to him or to call that one with whom you ended the last conversation with words of anger. Perhaps he is looking for you to take a step into the unknown or put the needs of the other first or something else entirely.

I can't tell you what he is asking of you on this day, but wouldn't be surprised if your first reaction is to echo the thinking of Simon: "I've done that. I've tried what you're suggesting. It didn't work before and won't work now." You may be right, too. Simon had no guarantee that casting a net into deep water in the middle of the day would bring a different result, either. But maybe, after voicing our well-reasoned and history-based objections to trying one more time the better response is to answer as did that very first disciple and reply "Yet if you say so..."

Will it lead to nets brimming with fish? I don't know, but do know that change will never occur unless you are willing to take the question Jesus is posing to you and give it a try. And how does this landlubber pastor know that to be true? A fisherman taught me.

