

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 5:1-11

"Catching Men"

Jesus the healer and teacher is creating a new community, which he calls "the kingdom of God." Its members are going to be drawn overwhelmingly from "the poor" - Jews who live on the edge, economically and socially - and from among "the sinners," another group we are going to meet in the next few chapters of Luke's telling of the Gospel. People are coming to Jesus in response to his preaching what Luke here for the first time calls "the word of God," and through his miracles - so far of healing and exorcism.

But the main thrust of this section of Luke 5 is to tell Luke's readers and us how one particular "poor sinner" came to be *the leader* of Jesus' followers. He was Simon, whom Jesus later renamed Peter, and referred to here as both Simon and Simon Peter. How did *he* come to be the leader? By the end of the section, he and his fellow fishermen are told they will now "catch men," but this narrative is about the way Jesus "caught Simon"!

1) Meeting and Hearing

We don't know exactly where Jesus and Simon Peter first met. Peter and his brother Andrew were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee (which Luke here calls the Lake of Gennesaret) and lived in the lakeside town of Capernaum. Presumably over a period of weeks or months they had heard and seen Jesus, the new local teacher and healer. On at

least one occasion Jesus had been a Sabbath guest in their home, and had healed Peter's mother-in-law of a fever. So Peter is at least acquainted with Jesus.

Then comes a day by the lake when the crowd listening to Jesus is large enough that he finds it difficult to talk to them, so he asks Peter for the use of his fishing boat, which is pulled up on the beach. Jesus tells him to "put out a little from the shore," and Peter gladly does. Jesus then speaks from the boat to the crowd on shore - a very effective way of dealing with the crush of people - and as sound travels well across smooth water, it was easy for people to hear Jesus speaking. So Peter, in the boat with Jesus, gets to hear the word of God, and its preacher, at close hand.

When his teaching is over, Jesus asks Peter to do something much more challenging. Let's take your boat out to the deep water and fish. Not a big request, we might think - except that Peter and Andrew and their friends James and John have spent all night in the deep and have caught nothing. Their nets are drying on the shore in the sun. So the fishermen are tired, and the nets they use are designed for night fishing - they are like great sheets of cloth, invisible to fish at night, but very obvious in daylight! Nobody goes boat fishing in the day! Casting a hand net from shore, or using a line, perhaps; but nobody goes out into the Lake - which is,

after all, 6-10 miles across in different parts, and known for its storminess when the winds sweep down off what we now call the Golan Heights.

But here we realize that Peter has already made some internal decisions about Jesus. He calls him "master" – a deferential title something akin to saying "rabbi" – and agrees "that because you say so, we will go out and fish." Peter is already able to obey Jesus' requests out of respect for his obvious authority and the power he has shown in healing. The result is a miraculous catch of fish, so large that it takes two boats to bring the nets ashore!

2) *A Sinner Called To Follow*

The fishermen are astonished! But something more is happening inside Peter. Still in the boat, Peter falls down before Jesus, overcome with the sense of his own unworthiness. He calls Jesus "Lord," and himself "a sinner." At some level that nobody else in the narrative has yet reached, Peter glimpses the holiness of God in this man Jesus, and it scares him. He would rather Jesus go away and leave them to their fishing...

It is a remarkable moment: for the first time in the Gospel, the issue of being "a sinner" arises simply because of the presence, the words, the actions, the person of Jesus. Suddenly we know that becoming part of Jesus' new community is not as easy as just receiving healing, or listening gladly to sermons, or even being an outcast who is promised God's grace. There is an uncomfortable personal dimension to it: Jesus somehow evokes a feeling of unworthiness in people who get close to him; the price of entering Jesus' new kingdom is apparently to be humbled before Jesus.

But now the grace of God that is in Jesus appears in a new way; implicitly Jesus says

to Peter "Yes, I know;" explicitly "Don't be afraid." Jesus, in whom the Spirit is powerfully at work, who heals and teaches with an authority that amazes people, says "It's ok – I know you're a sinner, but now you have at some level recognized me, and recognized who and what you are; and I have work for you to do." Peter and his bother Andrew, and their fishing colleagues James and John, are now commissioned as leaders of Jesus' new community, and told that in the future they will not fish the Sea of Galilee; instead they will fish for, they will "catch," other people. Just as Jesus has "caught" Peter, they will learn from him how to "catch men" for his kingdom.

And in case we might get the wrong impression of "catching," we should know that "to catch" meant at root "to take alive," and was used in hunting and in battle to refer to "taking alive" an animal or a prisoner with the aim of *delivering them from death*. Jesus' new disciples would not cast out nets or throw out baited hooks for people, drag them into the boat, and beat them over the head or leave them to suffocate! Nor should we! They would take them as a hunter takes an animal that needs to be taken alive so it can then be released in a safer place.

And "fishing for men," as some of the other Gospels call it, is something they will learn as they "follow" Jesus. These men now become Jesus' disciples, learners, pupils; and for them to enter his community and his kingdom means – at least for now – leaving behind the social and economic base they have had for years. So their boats are dragged ashore, and four fishermen leave Capernaum to follow Jesus the teacher, healer and miracle-worker around the lake from town to town, learning to "catch men."

3) *We Are Called*

A fascinating story! And we, like Luke and his early readers, have the advantage of knowing that this Peter becomes the leader of the Twelve closest disciples of Jesus, earns accolades and rebukes by Jesus, is his most loyal but also his most erratic supporter, is re-commissioned after dismal failure, and emerges as the de-facto leader of the community of Jesus-followers in Jerusalem. Peter will even preach and heal as Jesus did. And we know that Peter's name will be revered for countless generations to come!

How again did Peter come into this position? It started because he knew something of Jesus – his brother Andrew introduced them, we are told elsewhere – he had heard Jesus teach, he had seen Jesus help someone who was close to him. It moved on as he listened more closely, and obeyed Jesus' first request of him: to use his boat. Then he had obeyed a request that took him far beyond his normal practice, and the result was his own sense of unworthiness before Jesus. We could say that in the presence of Jesus, he came to a moment of repentance for who he was and what he had done. He was reassured that he was still accepted, and then commissioned to follow Jesus on the way of discipleship, to learn in the process how he could reach other people.

What about you and me? How did we come to be Jesus' disciples? I suspect our routes were many and varied, just as Peter's was only one of many paths to Jesus in his earthly ministry. But certain themes are likely to recur in anyone's journey to faith: for example, coming to know something about Jesus, hearing his words as "the word of God." Perhaps we might also have the experience of seeing Jesus do something for someone we know – a friend, a family member, a work colleague, someone we respect.

Perhaps you remember the story I have told before about two very successful men, good friends, who lived in an affluent suburb west of Boston. We'll call them Tom and Chuck. One evening Chuck sat in his car in Tom's driveway, mulling over his fate. Things had gone badly; he was in danger of prosecution, and perhaps prison time, all because of a little theft and not much money. He hadn't done these things himself, but he had at least turned a blind eye, if not encouraged them. Tom welcomed a weary Chuck into the house, and they went into Tom's study. He looked very relaxed, which was unusual, because Tom was CEO of a major corporation with defense contracts, and he had a headful of worries.

Chuck looked at Tom. "What has happened to you?" asked Chuck. "I have met Jesus as my Savior and Lord," said Tom. Chuck was astounded. He had never in his life heard that sort of language from Tom. They talked far into the night, and before dawn Chuck knelt on Tom's floor and confessed to Jesus that he was a sinner in need of redemption. He drove home with tears streaming down his face. He did go to prison for almost a year. But over the next 35 years he changed the futures of thousands of prisoners with the gospel of Jesus. Chuck was Charles Colson, one of the White House counselors to President Nixon who went to prison after the Watergate affair, and then founded Prison Fellowship, "the largest prison outreach and criminal justice reform organization in the world," now active in 112 countries. Tom was his good friend Thomas Phillips, then CEO of the Raytheon Corporation, who had just become a Christian through the ministry of a little Congregational Church. Tom still works today on promoting "Christianity in the workplace" ministries in Boston.

You come to know a little of Jesus; you hear his words as "the word of God," you see

what he has done for others, and at some point you come to that personal encounter where you bow before him and repent of what you have done and what you have not done with your life, and who you have become. And you hear the words of reassurance, "don't be afraid," and you discover what grace means – the love and kindness of God shown to people who don't deserve it. And then you are called to follow Jesus, leaving behind whatever needs to be left behind, and you learn to become a channel of God's grace into the lives of other people who need him too.

"People need the Lord," the hymn says. It's true, and they're everywhere: in your family and mine, in our neighborhoods, where we work, where we play. If we have become disciples of Jesus, by whatever path, part of our commission now is to help other people find their way to him. You don't have to be a White House aide, or a CEO, to do that; a fisherman will do fine – in fact, he will be the best at reaching other fishermen for Jesus.

Let us pray...