

*Jesus Said: 'Do Not Be Afraid.'*

Luke 5:1-11

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This is how it happened, the story tells us. It's pretty simple, really. Jesus was going around, saying what he was going to do, and then doing it. Remember when he went back to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth and read that passage from the prophet Isaiah, about bringing good news to the poor and sight to blind, release to the captives, a year of favor from the Lord, etc.?

At first everyone thought he was really great, really eloquent and interesting to listen to – very “charismatic,” we might say today, but then they remembered that, hey, he was only a hometown boy. So WHO did he think HE was, anyway? And then Jesus said, “You know, there are plenty of people out there who are going to be happy to hear what I have to say.” Then, the people of the town got really mad and tried to throw him off a CLIFF, but Jesus – he just walked right through the crowd, and no one even dared to touch him. Just like that.

This afternoon we're talking about a different town, and a very different crowd. Since that incident at Nazareth, Jesus has been healing people, casting out demons, and preaching so wonderfully that crowds are following him around and pressing in on him, even when he wants a little down time, a little solitude, maybe a little time to pray or rest. He was right, though – there are always plenty of people who are hungry for good news, for a word of hope. Whenever folks try to get him to stick around their own towns, he tells them, “I know what I'm about – I've got to proclaim this good news about God's love to the other cities, too, *for this is my purpose.*”

So, in this scripture lesson, the crowd has Jesus backed right up against the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and the people are all around him, hungry to hear a word from him. Nearby are some tired fishermen who have been out all night and haven't caught a thing. They're minding their own business, literally, just trying to clean their nets and head home after a long and discouraging night. But Jesus asks one of them, Simon, if he could use his boat as a kind of speaking platform. Voices carry well over water, and the people would be able to see and hear Jesus better if Simon would take the boat out a little way into the water, in the shallow part of the lake. Jesus sits down to teach, as rabbis did in those days – no microphones, no podiums, or even books to work with, no notes, and no reporters to share all this on the evening news. Just an amazing teaching moment.

Now, not one word of Jesus is recorded from his speech to the crowd, so how do you suppose we might figure out what he's trying to tell them? Biblical scholars say we can learn as much from what Jesus *does* as from what he *says*, because the most remarkable thing happens just then. He tells Simon, “Put out into the deep and let your nets down for a catch.” This is counter-intuitive to Simon. After all, he just got back from fishing all night without catching a single fish. *But* he says to Jesus, “If you say so,” and he heads out into the deep water. We know what happens next – he catches so many fish that the other fishermen have to come out and help, and the boats start to sink from the enormous catch! Nowadays, we tend to over-analyze everything to find a rational explanation for events we encounter, so we usually miss the meaning of great, unexpected wonders, but Peter, thank goodness, has sense enough to recognize a miracle when he sees one. This is such a dramatic moment in the story that Simon's name actually changes right in the middle of it – suddenly he's Simon Peter, and this new man is completely, utterly open to something far beyond his understanding, something that makes him painfully aware of his own limitations and his unworthiness, something that can, and will, transform his life.

He is awestruck, as we hear in biblical scholar and author Eugene Peterson's translation of his words: Lord, he says, “I'm a sinner and can't handle this holiness. Leave me to myself.” We ought to know enough to be struck by awe when we

witness such a thing! And yet, the first thing Jesus tells him is, “Do not be afraid.” *Do not be afraid*. We hear those words a lot in the Gospels, whether we pay attention to them or not. They reassure us, and they reassure Peter, and they help all of us – not just Peter – hear the next part, which is an invitation to follow Jesus and share this good news with all of God’s children. “Don’t be afraid,” Jesus says. “From now on, you’re going to be fishing for *people*.” Next thing you know, Peter, James, and John walk away from their boats – their sources of livelihood and security; they leave everything to follow Jesus.

I think it’s safe to say OUR BOATS matter a lot to us. It would take a lot for us to walk away from our homes, our jobs, our retirement savings, our health insurance. Maybe it strikes us as wholly unrealistic and perhaps even irresponsible to walk away from our work and the people it supports, including ourselves. But then perhaps that’s not the point of the story.

I am certain all of us here this afternoon have heard of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the Catholic nun who devoted her life to proclaiming God’s love for humanity – even the poorest of the poor. Now *there* was a person who walked away from everything and spent her life serving the poor. It sounds kind of romantic, in a way, and many of us have dreamed of leaving it all behind so we can go off to a foreign land and spend our lives doing good. But some years ago, Mother Teresa relayed in a speech that Americans were always saying they wanted to leave their lives here (in the United States) and go to India to work with her. To that she said, “Stay here, right where you are, and love the people God has given you to love. Care for people right where you are.”

After reading those words of Mother Teresa, I see the call of Jesus a little differently. If I want to follow Jesus, I don’t have to leave my home and family, and live on the streets, or in a faraway place like Calcutta. The water is plenty deep right here, right where I live. There’s plenty of challenge, plenty of possibility, and a very clear call to serve right here, where I am. You might say that one of the most important things I can do, however, is to look around and make sure there’s room in MY BOAT for others. These days though, more than ever, our culture tells us to look out for number one, to protect our own retirement and health care and property, and not to worry about others; to consider our own rights and needs and even wants and not consider the rights, needs and wants of others. But if we stay where we are – we have to make room in our boats and accept the challenges and possibilities – not just sit in the shallow end of things where our boat won’t be rocked, where life is safe, and not strike out into the deep water of possibilities and change.

The good news I hear in this afternoon’s reading is the word “abundance.” Again, we don’t know what Jesus said to that crowd, but I suspect that it had something to do with the overflowing abundance of life in God. In God’s love – a love we’re called to share with everyone – there is more than enough for each and every one of us. There is more than enough forgiveness, more than enough healing, more than enough grace.

What does it really mean for us to “leave everything and follow Jesus”? I think it means that we let go of the idea that there will ever be enough *things* to secure our future if we don’t make room in our boats, and in our hearts and our lives, for our sisters and brothers. I think it means that we let go of clenched fists that convince us that our money and our possessions belong to *us*, not to God. A favorite children’s message is a letter from a little boy who bargained with God – but didn’t want to let go of what really mattered to him: “Dear God,” he said, “If you give me a genie lamp like Aladdin, I will give you anything you want --- except my money and my chess set.”

Anything you want, God, except my money and my chess set...or my belief that I can take care of myself, or my conviction that it’s only fair that I have what I have – that I deserve what I have and that others who are in need, well, they must have done something to deserve what they have...or don’t have. Living life in God is a call that takes us to new places and even gives us a new name – Christian, disciple of Christ – and it transforms our lives in ways that surprise and

amaze us, and fill us full of awe.

Of course, those things won't happen if we don't trust God enough to strike out into the deep waters – even when we're tired, even when we're sure it won't work, even when conventional wisdom urges us instead to accept the seductive invitations of the materialistic culture around us to fill our boats with goodies and not give a thought to the welfare of others. What if we found ways to share what we have – whenever we have a choice in our voting, or in our giving, or in the ways we reach out to others and work with others to build a more compassionate world? What if we found ways to share when we consider the needs of the poor? Of children? Of the elderly? Of those who cannot take care of themselves? What if we found ways to share what we have whenever we make a decision in our personal or public lives?

But maybe “the deep waters” also represent those places we would rather *not* go, the places of discomfort and unfamiliarity, where we might “get in over our heads.” What if we forgive someone who has hurt us – how will we hold on to the feeling of being right, of being justified, of being the victim? What if we step up and offer our gifts to the community around us, our time and our talents in ways that help others and build up the community of God's children? Maybe, the world tells us, there are many things that could go wrong, and we would be better off just calling it a day and staying here, in the shallow water, drying our nets as we should, even if we're quietly dissatisfied in the end by the results of our efforts. I think not!

Remember, we're hearing this story during the season of Epiphany, when we're especially aware of the many ways we see God at work in the world. I think we're like Peter, and we realize that we can't just go back to our nets and our ordinary lives as if this story were not about us, as if this call were not our call, too. What if we can in fact clean those nets, do our work, and strike out again each morning to do the work of our lives and yet, at the same time, live lives true to the gospel? What if our lives could be transformed right where we are, with the people we love and know? It will take imagination, and courage, and trust, and a radical openness to all the epiphanies all around us, all the wonders that challenge our expectations.

As writer Renita Weems, says, the last thing those tired fishermen were expecting was a showing of God's awesome power right there, at the end of another workday. Why couldn't the same be said of our workdays: that they hold the possibility of seeing God's hand at work in our lives and all around us, even when we least expect it? Weems says that Jesus still shows up and surprises us, and next thing you know, our lives are changed forever.

I am sure that each one of you has had an experience at one time or another of God at work in your life – I know I have. What would happen if that experience changed your life, our life together, in such a way that we couldn't help telling the world about it? What if we get this sharing started, in our coffee time after worship, in our work together, and in the good news we can't help sharing – after all, as Jesus said, that *is our purpose*. Then, it's true, that every child of God touched by the ministry of this church might hear a word of good news so compelling that their lives, too, would never be the same.

You know, there are plenty of people out there who are going to be happy to hear what we have to say. So, then, let us be on our way – *and let us not be afraid*. Amen.