



Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush
Text: Luke 5:1-11

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A Complicated Call

In the gospels of Matthew and Mark, the description of Jesus' call to his first disciples seems pretty straightforward. Peter and Andrew were near their fishing boats on the shore of the Sea of Galilee when Jesus came by and said, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they dropped their nets, changed their career plans, and became Jesus' first disciples. It's a lovely and familiar story. But it is also a bit uncomfortable, because if you've ever pictured yourself in a similar situation - going about your daily routine when Jesus suddenly asks you to follow him - you'd likely have a few questions for Jesus before you'd drop everything and agree to become his disciple.

That is why it is such a blessing that we also have Luke's version of this same event. According to Luke, Jesus still encounters Peter and Andrew on the seashore. But the movement from fisherman to disciple takes a longer, more complicated path to unfold. And if we're being honest, that is also how the process unfolded, or is unfolding, in our own lives. So thank you, Luke, for being honest about this discipleship stuff.

In Luke's version of the call of Peter, there were five steps between Jesus' first meeting with him and his decision to follow Christ. Peter had not had a good night fishing. He had come up empty. He was tired and sore when this wandering rabbi asked him to get back into his boat and row out a bit so Jesus could address the gathered crowd. That was Step 1. Step 2 was harder. When Jesus finished speaking, he asked Peter to row out to deeper water and throw his nets into the water again. That was likely the last thing Peter wanted to do at that moment. He argued that it wasn't a good idea, but he did it anyway. Step 3: Peter's nets filled up with a miraculous catch, so much so that he had to call his workmates over to help pull the nets onboard. At this point, Peter realized Jesus is no typical preacher. Step 4 is when he is filled with humility and pleads for Jesus to go away. But Jesus calms his fears and opens the door to a new way of life for Peter. Step 5 came when Peter got back to shore, stepped through that door, and became a disciple of the Lord.

In Matthew and Mark's version, Peter's conversion happened in one quick step. But here we see more detail about how this decision unfolded. Peter first had to listen to Jesus; then he had to trust him enough to go out into deep waters. In that act of trusting obedience, he experienced miraculous things and even began recruiting others to this work. Upon reflection, he recognized that this good fortune wasn't due to his own

brilliance. But at last he accepted the extended hand of Christ and began walking a new path from that day forward.

Now, my first inclination was to spend the rest of this sermon fleshing out these steps in ways that would encourage you to be better followers of Christ. I would stress that we all need to listen more closely to what Jesus says. We need to trust where he leads and be willing to row out into deep waters. We need to work hard, especially when our nets overflow, and our friends need to be recruited to join us in these good works. We too should fall to our knees in humility but then joyfully take the Lord's extended hand as we walk by faith wherever he leads. It would have been a pretty good sermon, if I do say so myself.

But you're already here in the pews of a Christian church. Like our group of new members, you've been baptized and made professions of faith in Christ. You are doing good works - volunteering, donating to charity, caring for people in need, seeking justice, and praying for peace in a troubled world. My sermon might just run the risk of weighing you down. I could hammer home that discipleship requires more of us - more donations, more good deeds, more risk-taking for the Lord as if such things earned our salvation. But you'd just leave here thinking you're not doing enough. So instead, I want to focus on how we follow the five steps of Peter's story when things aren't going well. In hard times, how do we become fishers of people?

This past week I learned for the first time that Abraham Lincoln was involved in a duel with a man named James Shields. Shields was the state auditor when the Illinois bank went bankrupt and could no longer accept its own banknotes as valid currency. Lincoln wrote an anonymous letter in the paper, chiding Shields for allowing this to happen and adding a few extra comments about how Shields believed, because of his good looks, that it was a shame he couldn't marry all the eligible young women in town. Shields found out Lincoln wrote the letter and challenged him to a duel. Now Lincoln didn't want to duel with pistols because he was pretty sure Shields was the better shot, so he suggested they duel with large cavalry broadswords.

On the appointed day, September 22nd, the two men met face to face. Before the duel started, Lincoln swung his sword over Shield's head and cut off a nearby tree branch. Now, Lincoln was 6'4" tall; Shields was 5'9". The tree branch demonstration made Shields quickly realize that he was at a fatal disadvantage against the long-armed Lincoln. So the two men called a truce and the duel was averted. As an interesting footnote, 20 years later, Shields was a general in the Army of the Potomac and Lincoln was president. Shields died valiantly in a battle against Stonewall Jackson and Lincoln honored him with the rank of Major General for his service.¹

Now think about this incident as a parable about discipleship. Things were not going well when Lincoln found himself challenged to a duel. He first listened to his heart and

knew he didn't want to fight with guns. He then chose a different weapon and a different way to duel that offered a path for redemption for both. Before any blood was drawn, a non-violent demonstration with a tree branch offered a way forward without demeaning his opponent. A truce was called. Forgiveness was made real. And in time, both men proved valuable servants in preserving the Union they loved.

The path Lincoln followed in this situation was complicated, but effective. The truth is that when things are hard in our lives, simple answers rarely suffice. That's why if I were to lift up one detail from the story of Jesus and Peter to guide us when things look bleak, I'd focus on Jesus' invitation to throw out nets into deep water. The pivotal moment in that discipleship story was when Jesus turned to a tired, discouraged Simon Peter and told him to row out to a deeper place and cast his nets there. Yes, it was contrary to his instincts in that moment. Yes, it complicated his life. Just when he wanted to be done with fishing, wanted to dry his nets and head home to sleep at last, Jesus told him to go deeper. To commit. To trust that this other path was actually the better way.

What does Jesus' call mean to each of you today? When I hear you talk about why Immanuel church is important to you, you mention the worship services, the music, your connections with good friends inside these walls. But when I hear you talk about faith in action, how what you believe comes alive Monday through Saturday, you talk about food pantries and Cathedral Center meals and Habitat for Humanity projects. You talk about trips to Cuba to provide clean water. You talk about tutoring kids in the Forward Scholars program. You talk about driving Senior Partners to doctors' appointments, delivering flowers to people recovering from surgery, about teaching Sunday School and canvassing before elections and being out there in the deep waters of Milwaukee. You choose by faith to cast your nets into those waters, not to pull them in - not to pull back. You choose to engage, not disengage. And ultimately you do all that in response to the call of Jesus Christ in your lives.

Look, our faith is especially critical during this season of our lives. The chaos in Washington over the past few weeks has been fully intentional. Disruptive behavior by politicians creates the appearance of action without truly doing or accomplishing anything. As people of faith, we know that now is not the time to pull back, to disengage, to lock doors, to shut down aid programs, to tear down guardrails, to fire watchdogs, to call home health professionals and teachers and engineers serving those in need the world over. Now is the time to double-down, to go deep, to learn the names of those who are at risk or in need. For in the moment when we cast our nets into deep waters, we learn and experience a richness and a fullness of life so powerful that our nets overflow. We have to tell others. We call them over to join us in this work, these acts of compassion, in whatever calling of faith God has placed before each one of you.

And this is precisely where the song Will sang earlier comes into play. Like Simon Peter in his boat, we may not feel like we're up to this task. We may fall to our knees and say,

“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinner.” But that’s when we look at those we love around us and say to them, “Honestly, I’ll never be a knight in armor with a sword in hand. I won’t storm the barricades or take a stand. I don’t walk on coals; I won’t walk on water. But I’ll be someone you can fall back on. For as long as you’ll let me, I’ll be the one you need, someone to fall back on.”

That’s exactly the life Jesus offered to Peter – calling him to be someone to fall back on, someone to follow where Christ led, to point the way Christ had traveled, to be there when others run away, when others only care about themselves, when others insist we shouldn’t look out for one another. Jesus offered a complicated call, not as smooth or immediate as we might hope. But it was a real call. And on that day Peter became a disciple. So friends, go deep. Stand beside others. Be someone who cares, who perseveres, who invites others in. Be someone to fall back on. For such is Christ’s call for your life this very day. AMEN

¹ “Abraham Lincoln’s Duel: Broadswords and Banks,” American Battlefield Trust; battlefields.org.