

Caught by Surprise

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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Jesus Calls the First Disciples

⁵Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret (the Sea of Galilee), and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ² he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³ He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." ⁵ Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." ⁶ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷ So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" ⁹ For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰ and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." ¹¹ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

This is such a wonderful story, different from the call of the disciples in the other three gospels.

After a fruitless night of fishing, the fishermen are washing their nets. The crowds are pressing in upon Jesus, so he has an ingenious idea: to use a boat as a pulpit. So he climbs into Simon's boat. They hadn't caught any fish, so there's lots of room. Jesus asks Simon to push out a bit and Jesus teaches the crowd from there. (A pastor friend of mine used to re-enact this scene each year at his church's annual picnic, which was held at a park with a lake. He'd go out in a boat a little way from shore and preach the sermon from there.)

When Jesus is finished teaching the crowds he asks Simon to put out into deep water and let down the net. I imagine that Simon might have been a bit peeved at this request. First, Simon is tired. They had worked all night. Second, Simon is a professional fisherman. This Jesus character is a furniture-maker. What does he know about fishing? So Simon responds, "Master, we fished all night and we didn't catch anything, not even a bullhead. But, if you say so..." He pushes off, gets out to the deep, lets down the net and soon it is so full of fish the net is breaking and he has to signal to shore for James and John to hightail it out there to help and soon both boats are so full of fish they are close to sinking.

Simon realizes this is a miracle, and that he is in the presence of the divine. Intensely aware of his own faults and failings, Simon falls face down at Jesus' knees in terror, and pleads with Jesus to go away, for he, Simon, is "a sinful man."

"Don't be afraid," responds Jesus, "from now on you will be catching people." And then, the most amazing part of the story is not catching a gazillion fish. It's this final line: "When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him."

Wow, they have just brought in the most amazing catch of their entire fishing careers, but they leave behind all those fish and follow. "Their encounter with Jesus has completely reoriented their lives." (O. Wesley Allen)

So where does this 2000 year-old story touch our stories?

We read the biblical accounts of the call of the disciples and most of us think, "I can't imagine! If I heard a clear call from God, could I simply drop what I am doing and go follow Jesus? Leave my loaded shopping cart in the Cub parking lot and go? Get up from my desk at work and not even turn the computer off? (Inspired by Barbara Brown Taylor.) Hop up from wherever I am and take off after Jesus, leaving my *family* behind?" Simon had a mother-in-law, so presumably he had a wife...and maybe children. Wowzer!

But that's not what God is calling most of us to do. Some of us, yes, like my wife Kris's brother who was called to go to Africa and build hospitals. He's been doing that for over thirty years. But for most of us, God is calling us to follow Jesus right where we are—at work or school, in our condo association meetings, at the fitness center, within our families. Are we, indeed, sharing the good news of Jesus with the folks with whom we come into contact each week? How can God be present through me to these people?

To be a disciple of Jesus means watching the evening news and not just moaning and groaning and throwing our hands up in despair, but asking, "What does God need me to do about this to bring about shalom: healing, wholeness?"

But "Who am I?" we are tempted to say. "I'm a nobody." Well, who was Simon? A fisherman. According to Cicero, writing just a few years later, being a fisherman was one of "the most shameful occupations." And, as far as we can tell, Simon wasn't even very good at it. "Who am I?" That was the response to God's call, by Moses ("I don't speak good"), by Isaiah ("I am an abject sinner, a man of unclean lips"), by Jeremiah (I'm just a kid!). We think of those guys as giants of the faith, rightfully so, but that was *after* God had shaped them up. God only calls imperfect people, and then uses us and shapes us up.

To be called by God to be a disciple of Jesus.

Do you know the name, Kenneth Wyatt? He is an artist first famous for his paintings of western scenes, especially that of horses.

However, in recent years he has turned to creating paintings of the disciples. He tells the story of how a few years back he was lunching at the café in his hometown and he noticed the driver of an 18-wheeler at a nearby booth. He got up and strolled over to him. “Thomas?”

“No, my name’s Larry.”

“Well, pretty soon you will be better known as Thomas.” Wyatt then told Larry who he was and he got Larry to sit as a model for Wyatt’s painting of the disciple Thomas.

How do you think the truck driver heard those words: “From now on you are going to be known as one of the most famous of Jesus’ disciples”? What does it mean to you to hear Jesus say, “You are my disciple”?

Or perhaps you are not a disciple. Yesterday afternoon as I was practicing this sermon I realized I was making an assumption, that everyone listening already considered herself or himself to be a disciple. But surely in a gathering of this size there will be believers, doubters, skeptics. Surely most of you, but presumably not all, have said yes to Jesus.

In a moment we will take a little pause for you to consider the invitation that Jesus makes, “Come, follow me.” Now the way I usually think of it is...we simply say, “God, I give as much as I know of myself to as much as I know of you through Jesus.”

But first we need to consider what that means.

What does it mean to follow Jesus? It means to put our time under the lordship of Jesus. It means to turn over our money to Jesus’ control. It means using our abilities for Jesus.

The beginning of a true understanding of discipleship is to recognize that before and above anyone and anything else, we belong to Jesus. (Peter Eaton) Our identity; our first loyalty: disciple of Jesus.

Second. It means to share the good news of Jesus. We, too, are called to “catch people.” That phrase in the Greek means to “capture alive.” We don’t need to clobber people over the head with the Bible. But we are invited, indeed charged, to share with people where to find true life, and how to have it abundantly...John 10:10, my favorite passage in all of scripture. We are called to share with people what it means for us to “believe in Jesus.”

Third. It means to stand up for the poor and the oppressed and the marginalized. Following Jesus is counter-cultural. It always has been. It really is now in this country.

One more thing: a warning. Be aware that the forces of evil do not like it when we make such commitments. At Oak Grove we don't talk much about such things, but believe me, they are real. When we get serious about our faith, the forces of evil get serious about us, pay us more attention than usual, and seek to undermine us, in both direct and subtle ways. It is crucial to be aware and remain in prayer.

That sounds kind of scary, and everything else I've said is hard. But here's the thing. It's so worth it! Back to John 10:10: "I have come that (my followers) might have life, and have it abundantly." Let me emphasize that following Jesus is often hard, but it's the way to true satisfaction, meaning and deep joy in life.

I have just a little bit more to say about this passage. But first I invite you to commit, or re-commit, to give your life to Jesus, for the first time, or the thirtieth time. To say, "I give as much as I know of myself to as much as I know of you, God, through Jesus." Let us bow our heads and close our eyes. And in this time of silence I invite you, if you are ready, to make that decision. "God, I give as much as I know of myself to as much as I know of you, God, through Jesus. Amen."

(Time of silence.)

Two final thoughts. As Faith Conklin notes, to be a disciple means "getting up each morning and praying, 'God, show me how you will use me today.'"

I challenge you. Will you do that each day... for one week? "God, show me how you will use me today." Show of hands. Will you report back next Sunday? Show of hands.

"God, show me how you will use me today."

Finally, "Jesus' mission does not wait until we think we are ready," suggests Elisabeth Johnson. "The need for the gospel in this broken world is far too urgent. We are called right now -- even in spite of our frailty, failures, and doubts, even in the midst of our ordinary, busy, complicated lives. Jesus' word to Simon Peter is also a word to us: 'Do not be afraid.' This is Jesus' mission, and we trust that he will keep working with us and through us, 'catching' others as he has caught us -- in the deep, wide net of God's mercy and love. We trust, finally, that the catch is in God's hands, and that God's desire is for the nets to be bursting and the boats full."

To God be the honor and the glory and the praise, now and forever. Amen.