

Luke 5:1-11

Afraid and Amazed: Called by Jesus

January 28, 2018

Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore

The Rev. Dr. Tom Blair

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.

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.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. 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.

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; 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." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

—

I spent last week with my preaching buddies, reading the Bible and asking a lot of questions about the lessons we learn together. I have a residual list of questions for us today, left over from last week.

My guess is that this is one of the more familiar Bible stories of Jesus. What do you think?

Its familiarity gives us a chance to look at the story in more than one way. It is more than a fishing tale, although as a stand-alone event interpreted literally, it is amazingly powerful on its own.

Luke gives us the makings of a multi-layered study, with more meaning than we may have ever imagined. It reveals itself to us step by step along the way as we recount the story.

The scene takes place when Jesus is already famous enough to attract big crowds, and as he seemed to like to do, he spoke to the crowds along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, (Gennesaret is Luke's word for the same lake.)

He then went out into a boat, sat down and taught (as he did more than once.) Were the acoustics better that way, was everyone better able to see him out there? Who knows? But you can easily picture the scene in your minds' eye easily enough, can't you?

When he finished his lessons to the crowd, there was another message he had to deliver- in a different way.

It was time to go fishing.

Simon Peter protested. They'd been there, done that, all night long, and the fish weren't biting. But if Jesus said so, who was he to argue? It was time for another go at it.

Simon followed the instructions. He seemed to know that he was in the presence of an expert (which is kind of odd... because... wasn't Jesus a carpenter's son; how did he know so much about fishing?) Jesus was more than he appeared to be...

So without any other fuss, no secret incantations, no high and mighty prayer, after the disciples following Jesus' simple instructions to let down their nets in deeper water, the miracle began to happen, with enough fish filling the nets to tear them. Even two boats worth.

Here's where I need to stop and ask another question.

When have you been in the presence of a real expert; someone who proved their expertise, no questions asked, who amazed you with their gifts and abilities? Think about it....

Was it a celebrity, a business leader, an artist or musician- someone you looked up to and admired for their wisdom and understanding, their gifts and their sheer talent?

Here's a little story, just for sharing's sake...

When I was in seminary, back in Princeton, as some of you know, I was also the part-time coach of the women's track and field team at Princeton University. I coached the shot putters and discus throwers- who were pretty good athletes, really. I also competed myself.

At the 1980 Princeton Invitational Track Meet, an open event, I competed against the Best Discus Thrower Ever. Literally. He was Al Oerter (anyone ever hear of him?)

He rightly held the claim of being the greatest Olympian of all time. He was the first Olympian ever to win a Gold Medal in four consecutive Olympics (1956, '60, '64 and '68.)

He was a big man, 6'4" and about 280 pounds, and was making a comeback attempt in his late 40's- pretty unheard of... He still threw really far, in the 210 foot range. I was throwing in the 180 foot range, for comparison's sake. It was pretty magical for me to in the same competition with him, sharing the same throwing circle... and I'd like to say that some of his skill rubbed off on me, but that's not how it really works. Don't we wish it did!

Just being in the presence of someone great in their field doesn't automatically make you better. (I also once walked part of a PGA golf tournament, following the legendary golfer- Lee Trevino, but the next time I took my clubs out, I still hit the ball as erratically as ever.)

Being with a truly great performer, a great talent, a great mind can be very memorable, and it may inspire you and be very important to you in a lot of ways, but in the end, its just a start, with much more needed to follow.

In my case, with Al Oerter, there was no follow up- he was on to bigger and better things. Eventually an injury took him out of the 1980 Olympic trials. So it goes.

A different relationship existed between Jesus and Simon Peter, and thank God for that!

After the amazing and even frightening, immense catch of fish, Simon Peter and the others were awestruck, even terrified and didn't know what to do. That Simon Peter's first words to Jesus after this event were to 'go away, for I'm a sinful man'- speaks volumes.... That he doesn't consider himself worthy to breathe the same air as Jesus, or to share the same space they walk on, is telling.

Simon Peter believes that he's all too different from Jesus- not cut from the same cloth at all/ too different for Jesus to care at all about him/ he's so much trash. It would be interesting to hear more from Simon Peter about this, but we're not given a chance to find out.

Whatever Simon says or means doesn't deter Jesus from calling him to become a fisher of people. Jesus doesn't first call him to repent. He doesn't tell him to "go and sin no more." He doesn't tell him to go and sell all that he has. Simon says that he is a sinner- and Jesus calls him to become a fisher of people. Boom. And that's what he does.

Being in the presence of the One who is truly good, and not just great, or successful, or wealthy - confirms that you are loved, are worthy and accepted, just as you are.

Given that gift, perhaps there's something else going on in the story, something deeper... in more than one way.

As some have suggested, Jesus asking the fishermen to push out into deeper waters can have more than one meaning. It's both about physically relocating oneself and also about going deeper, psychologically, emotionally; trusting in the one who calls.... however that may happen.

For some, poetry helps. One of my favorite poets is Mary Oliver. In her poem, "In Blackwater Woods," she speaks of deep water and what that ultimately means for her... She describes it this way:

Every year, every thing
I have ever learned in my lifetime
leads back to this:
the fires and the black river of loss whose other side

is salvation, whose meaning none of us will ever know.

To live in this world
you must be able to do three things:
to love what is mortal; to hold it
against your bones knowing your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes, to let it go, to let it go.

Ultimately, this fishing story is about God, not the disciples or even us. For us to focus on what the disciples gave up and whether we could do the same is “to put the accent on the wrong syllable.”

This story is really about the power of God—to walk right up to a quartet of fishermen and work a miracle, creating faith where there was no faith, creating disciples where there were none just an hour before.

This is about following Jesus, just as you are— having been in his company and feeling a tug, just feeling that tug.

If this story is about being swept up into the flow of God’s mercy, caught in the net of God’s love, then it seems to me- since no two of us are the same- that it will be a different story for each one of us in our own particular lives.

- Sometimes following Jesus may mean staying at home. It may mean letting others go, while tending things others can’t or won’t do.
- Sometimes following can be casting the same old nets in a new way, in a new place, or for new reasons.
- It may mean doing something different, now equipped with new instructions and new urgency about it all.
- It might mean reorganizing the whole fishing business- venturing into a part of the open water where you’ve never been before.

The meanings and possibilities seems pretty endless to me. The implications could be very big, no doubt about it, even though the changes in themselves could be quite small.

It would be a mistake, I think, for us to focus too hard on our parts in the miracle of discipleship/ for that’s what it really is.... how afraid we might be of really being called, or amazed at what can, and already has been accomplished.

Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.

We are called, first of all, to give thanks to God who has and always can be counted on to bless us as people who are able to trust and to follow when we truly feel the call.

So whenever and wherever our will spills into the will of God, or, better said, when God's will and Spirit spills over into our lives; then the kingdom of God is at hand.

It's always helpful to remember that faith begins not with a set of beliefs to confirm to or a creed to ascribe to but with a voice; something internal in our souls that calls to us and says, "Follow me."

And for this, I am thankful. Amen.