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Luke 5:1-11

13th Message

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THE SHOES OF THE FISHERMAN

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

After our four-week flashback to Luke's birth narrative we now continue our studies in Luke at the point where we left off prior to Advent, the beginning of chapter 5. In this section of Luke, Jesus is teaching, healing, casting out demons, calling his disciples, and beginning to face mounting opposition.

In chapter 4 Jesus was rejected in Nazareth after he applied Isaiah's word about the servant to his own ministry. In Capernaum his reception was much different. People marveled because his words had great authority. Not only did he teach in Capernaum, he also performed many miracles including the casting out of a very vocal demon from a possessed man while in the synagogue and the healing of Peter's mother-in-law in Peter's home.

I doubt that very few of you know that my sermon title, *The Shoes of the Fisherman*, is the title of both a book and a movie, but it conveys two major ideas we see in our text this morning: one, the symbol of fishing and how Jesus makes a spiritual application of something very earthy, visible and familiar, and two, the idea of following in the steps of Jesus.

What does it mean to follow Jesus? What does it mean to become fishers of people? This is what we want to reflect on this morning. But first let us examine the text carefully.

Ken Bailey suggests that the text consists of seven scenes in inverted step parallelism with a setting and an explanatory note added:

1. The boat goes out (Jesus teaches)
2. Jesus speaks to Peter (catch fish)
3. Peter speaks to Jesus (in arrogance)
 4. A dramatic catch of fish (nature miracle)
5. Peter speaks to Jesus (in repentance)
6. Jesus speaks to Peter (catch people)
7. The boat returns (they follow Jesus)

In scenes 1 and 7 the boat goes out and comes back. In numbers 2 and 6 Jesus speaks to Peter, while in numbers 3 and 5 Peter addresses Jesus. The climax is found in the center with the dramatic catch of fish.¹

Mark records a similar and shorter version of this account in chapter 1, verses 16-20. However, the several differences between Mark and Luke might suggest separate events.

The Setting

On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. (Luke 5:1-2 ESV)

The setting is the Sea of Galilee, or as it was called in the OT, Kinnereth or Chinnereth. Gennesaret is the Grecized form of Chinnereth, which was also the name of a city and the fertile plain

south of Capernaum leading to the lake. Gennesaret means garden of riches. Galilee is a body of water 8 miles x 13 miles, roughly 700 feet deep, and in Jesus' day it provided a rich fishing industry.

Jesus has been teaching in synagogues but here we see that Jesus goes mobile, into the world of commerce and people and everyday life. The curious masses are pushing Jesus to the shore of the lake. He can't get away from them. They want to hear the word of God, a key phrase that is used 4 times in Luke and 14 times in Acts, a phrase that places Jesus in the world of the prophets. On the shore are two empty fishing boats. These boats were 20-30 feet long with flat bottoms for stability.

Boat Goes Out, Jesus Teaches

Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. (Luke 5:3)

Without any warning, Jesus climbs into Simon's empty boat and makes a request of him to put out a little way from the land. Luke uses the name Simon at this point and not Peter. Jesus sits down in the boat and begins to teach the people. Teaching while sitting down was a posture of authority and was common for Jesus. The north shore of Galilee near Capernaum would have provided a natural amphitheater. Jesus is fishing for people in order to bestow new life.

Jesus engages Peter with a request, "would you help me." Jesus needed Peter's help because the boat would have drifted in the lake and needed constant attention to remain in place while Jesus taught. We are reminded of how Jesus engaged the woman at the well in John 4: "give me a drink." Jesus had just healed Simon's mother-in-law and so Peter probably felt obligated to help. Notice that the focus is on Peter from the beginning and how Jesus isolates him from the crowd and his friends.

Jesus Commands to Catch Fish

And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." (Luke 5:4)

Peter would have expected to take Jesus back to shore when he finished teaching. But something else happens. Jesus tells Peter to put out to deeper water. The Sea of Galilee drops off into deep water very close to shore. The command, to put out into the deep, is singular and is addressed to Peter only. Jesus will not only guide Peter to deep water for fish but also to deeper waters of spiritual truth.

Peter Speaks in Arrogance

And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." (Luke 5:5)

Peter is incredulous and responds with surprise, annoyance, and probably arrogance. Jesus' request would have seemed absurd to Peter. Peter was exhausted and hungry from a fruitless night of fishing. The nets for deep-water fishing were extremely heavy and involved backbreaking labor. Peter is the fishing expert, not Jesus.

He knows that the best time to fish is during the night when the fish feed. During the day the fish could see the nets. But even though Peter probably feels resentment he agrees to comply. He addresses Jesus as chief, teacher, or master, the word Luke uses instead of Rabbi.

Miraculous Catch

And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. (Luke 5:6-7)

The miracle is the center of the story. When Peter puts the nets into the water, the nets become full of fish and begin to break. Peter signals to his partners, James and John, to come and help. Andrew is most likely with them as well. The word “signal” implies that Peter uses a non-verbal sign. Perhaps Jesus has some sort of sonar power to locate fish or perhaps a new spring has opened in the floor of the sea. A loud voice would carry across the water to the other people and there is no need to let other people in on the secret.

James and John come and together they fill both boats with fish. The catch is so enormous that the boats begin to sink. For them, the catch of fish is equivalent to winning the lottery. Peter and his friends have just hit the jackpot and acquired wealth! The long-term potential with Jesus being the fishing guide is off the charts!

Scene 5: Peter Speak in Humility

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. (Luke 5:8-10a)

Peter speaks to Jesus again but his time in a completely different manner than before. Luke now uses the name Simon Peter, which is unique to Luke. Jesus approaches Peter in his greatest area of strength, his ability as a fisherman, and Peter is undone. Peter falls on his knees, a sign of great humility. He knows that he is in the presence of holiness and he knows that he is an unclean sinner. This is the first time Luke uses the word “sinner.” Peter feels such unworthiness that he wants Jesus to depart. Instead of master or chief, Peter addresses Jesus as Lord. Even though Peter does not know the full extent of what that means, he acknowledges Jesus’ sovereignty.

I don’t know if you have had the experience of being in the presence of a powerful person, a person of lofty status, and when that person spoke you felt like it was God. I had that experience when I was working as an engineer. We were working on a government project that was having difficulties and a high-level government official addressed the entire project team. I remember this man’s address being a very sobering and unsettling, resulting in a sense of being very small. That is how Peter felt.

Peter’s response to Jesus seems strangely familiar to Isaiah’s response when he sees the Lord seated on his throne in Isaiah 6. Just as the Lord cleansed Isaiah and sent him to be his spokesman to an idolatrous nation, so Jesus would cleanse Peter and send him to preach the gospel. Jesus is in the business of saving sinners and using them for his purposes.

At this point it seems that Luke adds an explanatory note. Peter and all who were with him experience astonishment and amazement. The “all” includes James and John, Peter’s partners. Luke here may be

highlighting the inner apostolic circle. Astonishment seems to be the consistent response that people have to the events of the incarnation and the miracles of Jesus.

Jesus Commands to Catch People

And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” (Luke 5:10b)

Jesus now gets to the point of this whole exercise and tells Simon two things. The first is to not fear, a phrase that occurs 5 times in Luke. This is what the angel Gabriel said to Zechariah and Mary in chapter 1. “Don’t fear being a sinner, don’t fear your unworthiness, or don’t fear judgment. Sin will not be a hindrance to our relationship.” A relationship with Jesus is based on love, not fear.

Second, Jesus tells Peter he will be catching men and thus gives him a totally new vocation. The word “catching” literally means “catching alive.” It also means to rescue from danger. Peter’s vocation had been to catch fish that would die. Now he will fish for dead people in order to make them alive, rescuing them from the bondage of sin and Satan. Jesus takes something very familiar to Peter and his friends and completely reorients their lives. In the blink of an eye everything has changed through an encounter with Jesus.

The Boat Returns and They Follow

And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.” (Luke 5:11)

The fishing expedition ends and the boats are brought back to land. Peter and his friends leave everything and follow Jesus. Leaving everything means leaving boats, business, and family. However, one assumes they didn’t leave the fish to rot or their families to starve. Luke is simply being very brief.

Application

The story of the call of Peter is a familiar story. The challenge for each of us is to hear this story with fresh ears and receive it with an open heart. The challenge is to capture the same sense of amazement we might have experienced if we had been present. Imagine yourself for a minute in Peter’s shoes. You are worn out and spent from a night of fishing. You are starving and all you want to do is go home. But Jesus interrupts your plans and completely disrupts your life. Imagine yourself in a boat with Jesus when he asks you to go out to deeper water. Imagine realizing that you are in the presence of complete holiness. Imagine yourself hearing the words of Jesus to follow him. This is not just a story about what happened to Peter. This is a story about you and me. This is a story about what happens when we enter into a relationship with Jesus.

Jesus calls each of us to follow him, just as he did with Peter.

We often think that we made a decision to follow Jesus. But Scripture is pretty clear that Jesus initiated the relationship. God was looking for us before we started looking for God. God found us, not the other way around.

Paul tells the Ephesians:

God “chose us in him before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4 ESV)

This is why Paul corrects himself in Galatians:

“Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God ...” (Galatians 4:8–9)

Jesus chooses and calls not the brightest and best, but some very common, ordinary, and even disliked men as we will see in the case of Levi in a couple of weeks. These men don’t respond to Jesus because they deserve God’s gift. They know they need his grace. Jesus rescues sinners by the saving net of his grace. This is how our relationship with Jesus begins, as broken and vulnerable sinners just like Peter. We don’t have to get ourselves all cleaned up. We don’t have to fear rejection or condemnation. We simply respond to Jesus’ invitation to follow him.

The truth is that Jesus puts a call on your life. He chooses you. He wants you. He gets you away from the crowd and gets you into a boat with him and takes you to deep waters. He wants you to be a companion with him. For me this idea is amazing and puts a whole different spin on the relationship. I don’t even know how to describe it. But there is a big difference between saying, “I believe in Jesus,” and “Jesus has put a call on my life.” This is a weighty proposition. What if President Obama had called you to be Secretary of State? That would be a powerful call on our lives. How much more that Jesus has called me to be his companion? I am not in control. I am simply asked to follow.

And this calling is not static, a once for all time experience. Rather it is an ongoing and dynamic adventure. The call of Jesus leads us to a vocation. Vocation is not the same thing as a job, occupation, or career. Vocation is becoming the person God created you to be, basically to become your true self, with your unique personality, gifts, abilities, and identity.

Our calling or vocation will “grow out of our deepest desires, and will always involve some response to the needs of the world... This is what Fredrick Buechner means when he states that ‘the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.’”² Understanding our calling doesn’t come from willfulness but from surrender, receiving, listening, and responding. And so we continue to listen to Jesus. We get away from the crowds and we get in a boat with Jesus and we listen for how he is calling us to be his face in this world.

The call to follow Jesus means to become a disciple.

“Following Jesus” occurs 9 times in Luke and is the standard image for discipleship. The word “Christian” only occurs 3 times in the Bible but the word disciple occurs 261 times. The word means to be a student, a learner. Jesus doesn’t call us just to join a church or stop smoking. Becoming a Christian is not like joining a club, buying an insurance policy, or being accepted into a college. When we become a Christian, there are no other options other than being a disciple. We are used to a lot of options. Being a Christian doesn’t have any. This is the vision for the church – to make disciples out of sinners in a healthy environment. What does it mean to follow Jesus and be a disciple?

Following Jesus is an invitation to a pilgrimage, a transformational journey to learn how to become like Jesus in relation to self, God, and the world.

Following Jesus means to pursue wholeness not just holiness, being human not just spiritual, authenticity rather than conformity, transformation rather than fulfillment, union with God rather than perfection.

Following Jesus means to leave everything; everything that might hinder your walking and companionship with Jesus. This might include attachments to things that control your emotions, unhealthy relationships, an ego centered lifestyle, resentments and grudges, identities based on possessions and appearance, or addictions that keep us enslaved. This doesn’t necessarily mean that we have to leave our jobs or homes. But it does mean that we stop clutching and grasping, and hold everything loosely.

Following Jesus means to surrender control of your life and abandon yourself to God.

Following Jesus means to take up your cross daily, to die to self, and to accept your sufferings as the sufferings of Christ.

Following Jesus is not a journey of ascent. The journey of ascent leads to climbing up a spiritual ladder, seeing yourself as superior to others, relying on self-improvement projects and your own efforts. Rather, following Jesus is a journey of descent. The way of Jesus is the downward way. We become less and Jesus becomes more. This is the path to true humility.

Following Jesus will rearrange your life, turn your world upside down, call you to places that are uncomfortable, and reorient your thinking about money, sex, justice, marriage, prayer, work, and enemies.

Following Jesus also means to accept his easy yoke and find rest for your souls, to accept his invitation to come away with him and learn the unforced rhythms of grace.

What has it meant for you to follow Jesus? How might Jesus be asking you today to follow him today?

The call to follow Jesus is a call to missions.

In classical church architecture, the nave is the main portion of the church, the portion of that extends from the entry to the chancel, the portion where the congregation sits. The ceiling of the nave in such churches is a vaulted, rounded, often ribbed ceiling that resembles a boat turned upside down. The Latin word for boat or ship is *navis*. Churches were designed so that the congregation sat in the boat and people were reminded that God’s desire is to fill the boat with fish, not fish from other churches but new disciples.

Like Peter, we are sinners who become fishermen catching other sinners. We are beggars in need of grace offering the grace we have received to others. We love others with the love of Jesus. We are to be fishers of people, catching people for life, rescuing people from death. We do not fear the world or the people of the world because Jesus has overcome the world. The call to follow Jesus is a call to missions both locally and globally. Evangelism and missions are to be a high priority. It was for Jesus, and if we follow him it will be for us as well.

The metaphor for fishing is used several times in the OT. Most of the time it is a metaphor for judgment. But, in Ezekiel 47, it is used as a metaphor for life and salvation in the messianic age. Ezekiel describes a great river, a life-giving river, flowing from the temple:

And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish. For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes. Fishermen will stand beside the sea. From Engedi to Eneclaim it will be a place for the spreading of nets. Its fish will be of very many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. (Ezekiel 47:9–10)

In the 60's and 70's we couldn't stop talking about Jesus. Everywhere we went we were bringing seekers and searchers for life. Now, we tend to shy away from talking about Jesus; it isn't politically correct. The word Christian is overused and misunderstood.

Scot McKnight writes:

Evangelism is not always a positive term among Christians today. Indeed, because the Western Church has become hesitant to declare the Good News about Jesus, it needs to be called back to the task of reaching out to others. The Anglican leader and evangelist Michael Green cuts through church cant: 'God's church exists not for itself but for the benefit of those who are not yet members ...[and] the church which lives for itself will be sure to die by itself.' The church is not a religious club and it does not have a secular mission. Instead, it is a worshipping and sending community.³

This truth is so obvious from the passage and I don't want to beat you over the head and seek to stir up actions based on your own efforts. Let me suggest that missions is not something we program or take on as a task. Evangelism and missions are to be what we desire because this is what God desires. The desire to love others and share the good news of Jesus becomes simply who we are as disciples of Jesus. We don't have to fear. We don't know where to put down the net, but Jesus does. We are not adequate to bring someone to faith, but Jesus is. We are simply faithful to share truth and love with others wherever Jesus tells us to put down our net, whether that is in Cupertino, East Palo Alto, or Liberia.

Jesus put a call on Peter's life and he puts a call on our life. He calls us to be disciples and he calls us to be missionaries. We pray that we can answer the call.

What a great morning to come to the Lord's Table and be reminded of the body and the blood of Christ that was given so that we could be caught alive. As we sit with Jesus this morning we have an opportunity to say "yes" to Jesus' call, whatever that might be.

May God bless his word today and empower us through his Spirit to follow him with all of our heart.

1. Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 136-138
2. David Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 96-9)
3. Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2004), 232

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