

## “Put Out into the Deep Water...”

Luke 5:1-11

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Mason, Michigan

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Who’s ready to go fishing with Jesus? ‘Cause when he goes fishing, he *really* goes fishing!

We are at the Lake of Gennesaret, as Luke calls it. That’s just another name for the Sea of Galilee, that relatively large freshwater lake in northern Israel. It is nowhere near as large as a Great Lake, but still, for that part of the world, it’s pretty big: approximately 13 miles long, and 8 miles wide at its widest point, with a surface area of about 64 square miles. It is fed mainly by the Jordan River, which flows down from the mountains in northern Israel and Lebanon. 18 species of fish are native to the Sea of Galilee, primarily including several different kinds of tilapia, and sardines. Tons of fish – tons upon tons! – are caught by fishermen every year on the Sea of Galilee. It’s been that way for a very long time.

In the time of Jesus there were about a dozen towns and villages situated around the perimeter of the Sea of Galilee. There was Tiberias, a Roman city and the capital of the province of Galilee; and Magdala, a small Jewish city, presumably the birthplace of Mary Magdalene (Mary of Magdala); and Capernaum, a Jewish fishing village, with a population of about 1500 people; to name just a few. A fair amount of the early ministry of Jesus took place in and around Capernaum. It was probably on a shore like this one, not far from Capernaum, where the miraculous catch of fish occurred.

Jesus was teaching, “and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God.” The crowd was “pressing in”; Jesus was quite literally running out of room to stand on the shoreline. There were two fishing boats nearby; the fishermen were busy cleaning their nets – the large nets that they would toss into the water to try to scoop up fish. Jesus got into one of the boats and asked one of the fisherman to take the boat a little ways out – not too far, close enough so that he could continue his teaching while seated in the boat, and the crowd on the shoreline could still hear him.

Luke doesn’t tell us what Jesus was talking about. That’s not the point of this story. There are plenty of other times when Luke tells us, in detail, what Jesus had to say. This story is about *fishing*.

Jesus finishes his teaching, then tells the fisherman to head out into the deep water and let the nets down into the water. That fisherman is Simon Peter. This is not the first time he has encountered Jesus – Jesus had previously healed his mother-in-law of a high fever – but at this point he is still just a fisherman. Later he will become the most prominent of all Jesus’ disciples, and one of the most important apostles in the early church, with two letters in the New Testament attributed to him. But that is all in the future. Right now he’s just a fisherman, piloting the boat that Jesus is sitting in.

And he thinks that Jesus’ suggestion is pretty ridiculous. “Master, we have worked all night

long, but have caught nothing!” But after that initial protest he quickly agrees: “Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” He probably reminded himself of what Jesus can do; after all, he had seen it firsthand. So they head out into the deep water; at its deepest point, the Sea of Galilee is about 140 feet deep. They toss the nets into the water – and are *nearly overwhelmed* with a massive catch of fish. The nets are suddenly so heavy that they are in danger of breaking. Simon Peter signals the fishermen in the other boat to come help them. That’s James and John, the two sons of Zebedee; they were Simon Peter’s fishing partners. Together, the four men haul the fish into the two boats. They are now practically *swimming* in fish. There are so many fish in the boats that the boats are starting to sink!

At this point, Simon Peter drops down on his knees before Jesus. Not to ask for further help, nor to give thanks for the huge catch of fish – no, that’s not what’s on Simon Peter’s mind right now. He’s got something else he needs to say to Jesus: “Go away from me, Lord,” he says, “for I am a sinful man!”

Now isn’t that interesting. Jesus has just helped Simon Peter catch a *lot* of fish – probably Simon Peter’s biggest catch, ever – and now Simon Peter is telling Jesus to *go away*. Why? Because, in Simon Peter’s words, “I’m a sinful man.” He does not think he is *worthy* to be in the presence of this Master who can work miracles. I have no idea what Simon Peter’s sins were, but *he* was certainly aware of them, perhaps painfully aware, and he had the mistaken belief – mistaken, but all-too-common – that you can’t be in the presence of Jesus if you’re a sinful man. Or woman, but perhaps it’s more common among men. To this day there are vast numbers of people who don’t think they are *worthy* to come to church, who for some reason think that they need to clean up their act *before* they walk into a church. But Jesus’ words and actions speak a different truth. Jesus surely knew what kind of a man Simon Peter was, what kind of sins he committed, and how frequently. And *it didn’t matter* to Jesus. Or maybe it *did* matter, but not in the way that Simon Peter thought. Jesus doesn’t call *perfect* people to follow him. Jesus calls *sinful* people to follow him. People like Simon Peter. People like me. People like you.

“Do not be afraid,” Jesus says to Simon Peter. “From now on you will be catching people.” Jesus is looking deep into Simon Peter’s eyes, looking deep into his heart, and inviting him – *calling* him – to a different way of life. To a different *vocation*, but it’s more than just a change of jobs. Jesus is inviting Simon Peter to an *entirely different kind of life* than what Peter has lived up to now. A life in which he will not only strive to follow Jesus – which, let’s be honest, he doesn’t do perfectly – but also a life in which he will invite and lead *other* people to follow Jesus. In time, he will be wildly successful.

He is being invited to become both a *disciple* and an *apostle*. A disciple is a “student,” a “learner,” someone who willingly chooses to place themselves at the feet of their chosen Master, listening to them, learning from them, patterning their life after them. *All of us* are called to become disciples of Christ, students of Jesus; listening to him, learning from him, patterning our lives after him. Discipleship is, to a very large extent, what Christianity is all about; after his resurrection, he tells his apostles to “go out and make disciples of all nations.” We are *all* called to listen to and learn from Jesus.

But, in Simon Peter’s case, it doesn’t stop there. Jesus wants him to be a disciple, and also an *apostle*, which is a select sub-set of disciples, those whom Jesus sends out into the world to *catch people*. The word “apostle” means someone who is *sent*. Jesus is going to *send* Simon Peter out to fish for people. That will happen later; one has to be a disciple before one can become an apostle; you can’t invite someone else to follow Jesus if you’re not on that journey yourself. Simon Peter is just beginning.

He accepts the invitation. “When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything

and followed him.” So begins this man’s journey, a journey through about three years of discipleship, and then about three *decades* of apostleship. He shared the Gospel with the Samaritans, and later with the Gentiles. Twice he was brought before the Jewish High Council for questioning; later he was imprisoned during one of the earliest persecutions against Christians. According to the apostle Paul, Simon Peter was the first person to see the risen Christ following his resurrection; Jesus had also said that Simon Peter was “the rock” on which Christ’s church would be built. The Roman Catholic Church views Simon Peter as the first Pope. Tradition has it that Simon Peter helped found the church in Rome, and that he was crucified there by order of Emperor Nero – but, considering himself unworthy to die in the manner in which his Lord had died, Simon Peter requested that he be crucified upside-down. Four centuries later, St. Peter’s Basilica was built over the site where Christians believed Simon Peter had been buried – indeed, the high altar in the Basilica was built directly over the burial spot. The cities of St. Petersburg, Florida, and St. Petersburg, Russia, were both named in honor of Simon Peter.

Yet here, at the beginning of his journey, he is just a simple man, trying to eke out a living for himself and his family, as a simple fisherman. “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” He did not have a very high opinion of himself – but Jesus saw him differently. Jesus could see the potential that existed in him, that Simon Peter could not see. Jesus can see the potential that exists in *you*, the potential that *you* might not be able to see. You might look at yourself and see all your flaws, all your insecurities, all your human weaknesses, all the things you do that you’re not very proud of, all the things that some people say about you that aren’t very complimentary, all the ways you have hurt or disappointed other people, all the things you have done in your past that you wish you had never done, all the ways you feel like you have let God down. Jesus sees all of that too. But Jesus sees *beyond* all that. Jesus sees the person you can *become*. You might think of yourself as a failure, a loser, someone whom the world looks down upon, someone not worthy of anyone’s time or attention. Jesus looks at you and sees ... something else. Jesus sees your *heart*, your *soul*; Jesus sees the golden parts of you that God implanted in you, that have become tarnished by circumstances beyond your ability to control; Jesus sees the things that have happened to you that have hurt you and impacted the way you live your life and the kinds of choices you make; Jesus looks at you and sees *a beloved child of God* who is worth saving, worth redeeming, worth living and dying for. Jesus looks at you and sees *the image of God*.

Maybe your journey begins with a miraculous catch of fish. Or maybe it begins with something else entirely. Or maybe your journey began long ago, but it got thrown off course, and you want to get back on track. Maybe you’re in a boat with Jesus, perhaps a real boat like Simon Peter was, or more likely a metaphorical boat, a “boat” that you spend a lot of time in, and you sense that Jesus is offering you something. Something ... *special*. You might not feel worthy of such a gift. You might not feel worthy of such incredible *grace*. You might think there’s no good reason for Jesus to reach out to *you*.

And ... you would be wrong. Because the great love of Jesus, the magnificent grace of God, is for *all* people. *Everyone*. Everywhere. Regardless of ... anything. Christ lived and died and rose ... *for you*.

Why? Because he *loves* you ... so *incredibly* much. And he sees such amazing *potential* in you.

Simon Peter had absolutely *no idea* where his journey would lead. Neither do you. Who knows where Jesus is going to lead you, what he’s going to inspire you to do. How much positive *difference* you will make in this world, through him. All you have to do is accept his invitation ... then let him lead.

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