

“When Jesus Calls”

Luke 5:1-11

Rev. Bill Pinches

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Jesus has identified his mission: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Isaiah’s words, which Jesus has claimed as his own. Bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and the year of the Lord’s favor – that’s what Jesus is about. He has also made it very clear that he’s talking about ministering to people *not like* him, at least as much as (or maybe more than!) ministering to his *own* people. That message nearly got him killed in his own hometown. Jesus has a *mission*; he has a *purpose*; he *knows* why he’s here. Now he needs some *helpers*.

He goes to the lakeshore. The Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Gennesaret. A freshwater lake, with a large abundance of fish. Want some tilapia? The Sea of Galilee is a *great* place to get some! Fishing villages were spread all around the lakeshore. The historian Josephus, writing about 50 years after the ministry of Jesus, estimated that there were about 230 fishing boats out on the lake all the time.

Two of those boats were resting on the beach. The four fishermen in those boats had worked all through the night – and had caught absolutely nothing. Now they’re cleaning their nets, the nets they would use to haul in as many fish as they could. They’re shutting down for the day, weary, discouraged, no doubt worrying about the economic stress that a night of no fish will cause them and their families.

Also on the beach is a group of people whom Jesus is teaching. Is it coincidence that Jesus just *happens* to be teaching right near where Simon, Andrew, James, and John are working? I think not! I think Jesus knew what he wanted – knew *who* he wanted – and cleverly arranged this happy meeting.

Jesus steps into Simon and Andrew’s boat and asks Simon to bring him out a little ways into the water. His stated purpose was to enable his voice to project better, so that the people on the beach could hear him more clearly. His *deeper* purpose was to “catch” Simon. Jesus tells Simon to head out to the deep water and lower his nets. Simon protests; he thinks that’s pointless; there are no fish out there today. But something in Jesus’s voice causes him to do what Jesus says. *Surprise* – when he does as Jesus asks, there are *so many* fish that Simon and Andrew have to call James and John for help. In the end, *both* boats are filled with fish, and the four men are *ecstatic*. Ecstatic – and *utterly astonished*. Simon realizes: there’s something *very special* about this teacher. Something *powerful*, something *profound*.

Does Simon recognize who Jesus is? Does he know that he’s in the presence of the Son of Man, the Messiah, the only-begotten Son of God, *God incarnate*? Probably not, not *all* of that, not yet, but Simon does perceive *something*. Two things, really. The first is that this man has undoubtedly just done

something *truly miraculous*, for Simon knows – knows very well! – that *there were no fish in that water all night long* – and now there are *hundreds upon hundreds*, the largest catch Simon and his companions have ever hauled ashore. Second, Simon perceives that there is something *holy* about this man. “Go away from me, Lord,” Simon pleads, “for I am a sinful man!” Simon does not feel *worthy* to stand in this man’s presence. He does not want to *taint* this man’s holiness with his own sinfulness. Oh yes, Simon is a sinful man, sinful like any of us, like *all* of us, imperfect, flawed, suffering from our own demons, succumbing to our own temptations – but perhaps Simon is more sinful than *most*. If you watch *The Chosen*, you’ll meet a Simon who is selfish and stubborn, deceptive and dangerous, headstrong and hotheaded. He hardly has the temperament of someone who will later become the rock upon which Jesus will build his church. Simon needs to *mature*, to *grow*. Maybe that’s part of the reason why Jesus chooses him. The one who needs to *grow the most* – *that’s* the one whom Jesus sets his sights on first.

Jesus doesn’t call us because of who we already *are*. He calls us because of *who we can become*.

Jesus looks at Simon and says: “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” Ordinarily, when people go fishing, the fish are *alive* before they are caught, and *dead* soon after. Jesus is calling Simon and his companions to do the exact opposite: to catch people who are, so to speak, *spiritually dead*, so that they may be brought to spiritual *life* – the *real* life that God truly *intended* for them. Everything changes that day for Simon, Andrew, James, and John. They cast aside their nets and start following Jesus. They take up a new *purpose* in life. They have been given a new *vocation*.

Merriam-Webster primarily defines the word *vocation* as “a summons or strong inclination to a particular state or course of action.” It comes from the Latin noun *vocatio*, which means “summons,” and the verb *vocare*, which means “to call.” A vocation, strictly speaking, means *work that you have been called to do*. That means that something – or *Someone* – is doing the *calling*. Someone is telling you to get up off your duff and *do something* with your life, or – as in the case of Simon and his companions – to *do something different* with your life. Simon may have thought that he already *had* a vocation. Jesus says, “no, Simon, there’s something *different* that I need you to do.” Jesus doesn’t spell it out exactly – he doesn’t say, “Later on, I’m going to send you out to cure diseases and cast out demons,” and he certainly doesn’t tell Simon, “Twenty years from now, you’re going to be the first Bishop of Rome.” He simply says: “From now on you will be catching people.” Simon has *no idea* where this road is going to lead.

Neither do we, right? When Jesus calls *us* to leave our former life behind and follow him, we have *no idea* where he is going to lead us. Nor do we have any idea how much *hardship* we might have to endure along the way. Simon would face the trauma of Jesus’s passion and death, persecutions, and eventually martyrdom. Would he have said, “Sure, I’ll follow you,” if he had *known* what was to come?

On my very first day as a pastor, I found myself officiating at a funeral for a woman I had never met, and then, just a few hours later, counseling a young adult who was contemplating suicide. That was certainly *not* how I anticipated my ministry would begin! That night I called my pastor/mentor back home, telling him about my day and asking for some advice. His reply: “*Welcome to the ministry.*”

We *never know* what will lie ahead when we say “yes” to God’s call. We might *think* it will always be easy and straightforward. We might *think* it will always feel joyful and fun. We might be wrong!

A few months ago I had a wonderful conversation with a paramedic. This conversation took place in the back of an ambulance, en route to the Emergency Room; he was taking care of me as I was

dealing with a complication following my ankle surgery last summer. He was professional, friendly, and supportive; he reminded me of another paramedic I had known, one beloved by many of us in this congregation. As we talked, I commented, “I bet you’ve seen a lot of interesting cases over the years.” He replied: “You wouldn’t *believe* the things I’ve seen – and it’s gotten a lot *worse* in the last 25 years.”

I don’t think he’s alone. I think many people in the helping professions – paramedics, teachers, nurses, counselors, police officers, social workers, clergy – are sensing that their jobs have gotten harder. I don’t think that’s just nostalgia; I think our world has gotten more *intense*, more extreme. Anybody who is in direct contact with the wide mass of humanity, with people very much *not like us*, *never know* what situations we will face, what *real humans* we will encounter who desperately and urgently need *our* help. We Christians are called to spread the everlasting love and amazing grace of God to *everyone*. We are Jesus’s hands, heart, and feet here on this earth. Christ calls *us* to build up the kingdom of God.

Doing what Jesus calls us to do – whatever that may be for *you* – is not a job for the faint of heart. It’s a job that will require perseverance, patience, wisdom, compassion, courage, a tremendous amount of love, and also a generous measure of *hope*. It will require a resolute willingness to take on unforeseen challenges, and to *keep going* even on the days when you don’t feel like it. It will also require a whole lot of *self-care*. The needs of the world are *endless*. Jesus was *constantly* surrounded by people asking for help, begging him to tend to their needs – yet, when we read the Gospels, we find Jesus constantly going up a mountain to pray, to find a place where he could commune with God in peace and quiet, where he could receive guidance and refreshment, *so that* he could go back down again and keep doing the very hard work of building up the kingdom of God. If *Jesus* needed regular opportunities to get away from it all and reconnect with God – then *certainly* do the rest of us! Jesus does not call anyone to *wear themselves out*. Jesus wants us to *take care of ourselves* so that we can keep on *doing his work*.

Following Jesus *is hard*. Doing what Jesus calls you to do can be *extremely* difficult. We are living in especially precarious times right now, which makes it that much harder. A vast multitude of people across our country right now are wondering: “Do I have the *strength* to keep on doing this? Do I have what it takes to keep getting out of bed, day after day, to do the work that I *believe in the depths of my heart* that God has called me to do?” Some of them are saying, “no.” Some are saying, “It’s time for me to retire.” Others are saying, “It’s time to find something else to do with my life.” Yet there are others who are saying, “This has always been hard, and now it’s harder, and I *still* believe God is calling me to do this, which means I need to find strength to *keep on going*, keep on doing what I know in my heart God *needs* me to do.” If you’re one of those people – well, first of all, *God bless you*, because the world desperately *needs* you. Secondly – ask yourself, in all sincerity, *what do I need to receive every day so that I can keep on giving?* Maybe it’s some affirmations of your gifts from other people. Maybe it’s a saying or a verse that you keep in front of you all the time. Maybe it’s a statement about your mission and purpose in life that you’ve written yourself. Maybe it’s a spiritual practice that nourishes you every morning. What do *you* need to receive every day, *so that* you can keep doing what Jesus asks you to do?

Jesus calls us to *follow*, to *serve*, to *build* the kingdom of God. The question is not simply: *are* we going to follow? The question is also: *how* are we going to *keep on* following, when what Jesus asks of us gets *really difficult*? I pray that you will not only answer the first question with a decisive “yes,” *but also* develop an answer to the *second* question. *What do you need from God, so that you can give for God?*

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