

What's your availability?

First Congregational Church, Branford

Luke 5:1-11; February 10, 2019

Rev. Suzanne Personette

I love to tell the story!

In the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Luke, Luke tells us:

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.

There may be good reasons why Jesus asked fishermen to be his disciples. Fishermen worked year-round in the heat of summer and the cold of winter, often at night. Fishermen were a hardy group of people, accustomed to difficult work and long hours. The long hours, the carefully practiced skills of catching fish through a variety of methods would all be useful. Seeking *people* to follow Jesus would take the same care, dedication, and skill used in fishing.

We have Peter, James, and John – they've been up all night fishing, and didn't catch a thing. The sun comes up; they've returned to the shore empty-handed. They're tired, cranky, probably hungry, but they have to go back after very little sleep to cast another net, or line, or spear. And this Jesus guy comes along, helps them catch boatloads of fish, and then says something mysterious about catching people. Wait, what? But, in a leap of faith, they followed him.

They gave up everything. But, it's not like they were investment bankers – they sat in blistering heat trying to catch fish! But, listen, maybe they had a spouse, and children they had to leave... I've met with faithful church members through the years who've said they're afraid to say to Jesus, *I will do whatever you want me to do, I will go wherever you want me to go, whenever you want me to* because they're afraid Jesus is going to ask something too great. ***Do not be afraid.*** While it's true that God might ask a big thing from a follower, following God more often means doing some other hard things, like loving your enemy; sacrificing a rigid opinion or attitude about some matter; forgiving your neighbor; volunteering at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter; putting more of your earnings in the collection plate; visiting those in prison. For most people who say, *I will go, Lord, if you lead me*, it's not going to mean going halfway around the world to live and serve as a missionary! Ya know... it may actually be harder to love your enemy, apologize to people, make amends, then it is to be a missionary.

I wonder if there's anyone here this morning who can identify with those fishermen - you've toiled for long periods of time without bearing any fruit... maybe you've been out there pounding the pavement for a job - whatever it is you've been toiling at, you suddenly realize that you didn't invite Jesus into the boat! You were doing it on your own, apart from the guidance, comfort and grace of Jesus. Has it ever been your experience that when you just stop... and pray, *Can you please help me with this*, its like fish fly into your boat?! Whatever the task, it just suddenly becomes easier. *With* Jesus in the boat, the fisherman had two boat fulls of fish. Jesus provided a way, *when on their own*, there was no way. Whether it's relationships, jobs, schoolwork, health, some decision, or dilemma, Jesus' promise to us is that when we abide in him and he in us, *we will bear much fruit.*

Let's look at another reason why Jesus sought fishermen to be his disciples: not being formally educated, they were teachable - they didn't think they knew everything! I remember a teacher I had in my college Religious Studies Buddhism class, when, at 30 years old, I said something in class about how much I'd now learned and understood about life, and he said with soft eyes - *you may have been better before!* Be careful when you think you're so smart! You start telling Jesus what it is *you* know. Right? Hey, Jesus, let me tell you a thing or two how you should do things around here!... Jesus chooses *followers* – not those who say, *I've got this, I know how to do this.*

And, there was something else Jesus knew about Peter, James, and John. He knew they had need. Jesus doesn't come to you if you're not aware of your need, *of the empty nets of a life of trying to do it all on your own.* When we say, *my nets are full*, Jesus moves on. There are plenty of empty nets out there!

As the choir sang, its when adventure has lost its meaning, that we're homeward bound. Maybe its like this... God sets you free to find your calling - you go out in the world, have the experience of getting some full nets all on your own - you've had some great accomplishments! Well done! ... But, when they come up empty one day, you return to Him somehow...

I know that it can be very difficult to hand over your life to Jesus if you've come from an environment where you couldn't count on someone to be there for you. Maybe you've had to hold it all together because of having an addict as a spouse *or some other problem in the family* - you're white-knuckling it, taking care of everything; maybe you're a single parent and everything depends on you.

But... when you're tired of doing it on your own, *when there's nothing left in you*... you let go, and surrender - when you fall back in his arms. I'm sure many of us know the peace that comes when you just let Jesus in the boat. Take a moment right now. Maybe close your eyes. Is there something you've sort of been carrying on your own?... See it, feel its weight... Now, ask Jesus to get in the boat with you... Amen. It feels different, doesn't it? Lighter? More hopeful?

See, I believe... when he saves us like that, it becomes our *joy* to follow him, and to serve him, and to do difficult things like apologize or forgive... **or**, to tell him that you're available to go fishing for him! We're finally at the second part of the sermon! While those fishermen needed Jesus, he needed them, too! He was just one person. He'd need them to help in this ministry of caring for others, loving, forgiving, and confronting injustice, something they'd need to continue to do after he was gone.

People most often say to me, I don't have anything Jesus could use, or they're like Peter, *I'm not good, I'm sinful*, but I found the most marvelous graphic that I used in my eSpire article this past Thursday that I hope you saw: *Jesus doesn't ask about our abilities, or inabilities, but only our availability*. You don't have to be all that! *He just wants to know if you're available!* Isn't that great?!

I'm going to ask two things of you. I read a little book this week called Grow Your Church. If we do two things, we're going to grow. If we don't, we won't. First, we need to say to friends, family, acquaintances, *would you like to come to church with me this Sunday?* Say it with me... Can I have two guinea pigs to stand up (one asks the question to the other - the person said yes, they'd be happy to!) I know that thinking about doing such a thing fills you with fear and anxiety - *you feel it right here* (gut). I know, I do, too - I'm not that good with this, either. We don't want people to think we're that religious, or we don't believe that much in our church - *well, it's good enough for me, but maybe it's not good enough for so and so and I don't want to disappoint them, and I don't want them to judge me*. We have a lot of excuses! But, here we are...(with under 60 people

today)... for the sake of Jesus and his church, do you think we can follow him and go fishing?... He says, *do not be afraid*.

Second, for the brave fish who just happen to jump in our boat on their own on a Sunday morning, imagine how nervous making it feels to be in a new place - where everyone knows each other and what to do. Think about everything that led them to visit the church and what getting ready that morning was like for them. Then, imagine how wonderful it must feel to be smiled at, greeted warmly, have someone take your hand and shake it, and say, *I'm so glad you're here*. And, then afterward, you show them to Pilgrim Hall, and introduce them to others... Here's what we know: they've come seeking something. They've come to you... Something more for their lives, a home... maybe they're returning to God. Maybe their net is empty. Or, maybe they just want to belong to you and praise God with you! Maybe they want to sing in the choir!

It can be so hard to get out of ourselves and our routines and go talk with people. We worry about saying the wrong thing. But, hey, once *we make the decision to invite people*, and to welcome the ones who are here, God will send us lots of chances to practice! How's that? If you get it wrong one time, don't worry, you'll get another opportunity! If we do this, I *promise* you that it will bear two boats of fish. If you say to God, *I'm available to you.... I'll go fishin'!* Lastly, and here's the greatest part I realized, you don't have to believe in yourself, you don't even have to believe in the church. All you have to do is believe in... *Him*. ALL you have to do it believe in Him.

God bless you and commission you to follow Jesus' commandment to greet one another and make disciples. You have all of the skills, resources, gifts and information that you need to walk up to someone and invite them to church, *and* to greet visitors.

Would you pray the prayer in the bulletin with me?

Loving God, this is your church. I can't grow it by myself so I am casting this burden on you and I ask that you grow it. If there is something you want me to do to help then let me know. Be sure to make it really, really clear so that I don't miss it. Amen.

