

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
6 February 2022

Luke 5:1-11

This passage in Luke highlights the calling of the earliest apostles, but in many ways, this is a very different account to the version given to us by Matthew and Mark. In Mark, we see the following sequence: Jesus passes along the Sea of Galilee, sees Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, and says to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' Then, "Immediately" they left their nets and followed him. Then he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. He calls them and "Immediately" they left everything and followed Jesus. This sequence is repeated almost word by word by Matthew: Jesus walks by the Sea of Galilee, sees Peter and Andrew casting a net into the lake. He says to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' Then, "Immediately" they left everything and followed Jesus. He then comes upon James and his brother John mending their nets. He calls them and they "immediately" left the boat and their father, and followed him. So, in both of these passages we see the immediacy with which they left everything and followed Jesus. It is almost as though these people knew something we don't. They had a compelling reason to follow Jesus, but we don't know what it is. Their example is difficult to follow, because we have no context to understand why they followed Jesus. There is a story here that we are not given!

As beautiful as this message of complete devotion and "going all in at once for Jesus" is, this is not what we see in Luke. In our passage today we see a different process that gives us more context about why they decided to follow this mysterious Rabbi. First, Jesus is not walking by the lake, but rather he is "standing beside" the lake. We also hear that the "crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God." So, not only is Jesus stationary by the lake, but he is also teaching to a large crowd. He then begins to run out of space as the crowds were pressing in on him. He saw two boats there at the shore of the lake. It was rather late in the day for fishing, and the fishermen had returned to the shore empty-handed and were washing their nets. This is not at all unusual. Sometimes you have a great catch and sometimes you return to shore emptyhanded. Fishermen were accustomed to this fact of life. We are then told that Jesus got into one of the boats, and began to preach from a boat. This gave him some distance from the crowds. We are not told exactly what Jesus was teaching them, but only that he was teaching them. This is common in the Gospels, where the act of teaching is often as important as the teaching itself. Whatever Jesus might have been saying, however, the crowds were captivated.

In the Gospels of Mark and Matthew we see no evidence that Jesus was either teaching when he called the first Apostles, or that the crowds were pressing in on him. This makes the reaction of the first Apostles very remarkable. Many ask the question,

why would these men leave their elderly father, family business, maybe even spouses, to follow this Jesus? This almost makes no sense. In Luke, we have a clue. They had listened to Jesus preaching and they were captivated by the words of this Rabbi. They had met this Jesus, they had paid attention to his words, and they were moved to the core. Remember that there was great excitement and expectation in Israel about the coming of Messiah. The prophets had been announcing for centuries that at the right time a prophet like Moses would come to liberate Israel. In fact, there had been many preachers before Jesus proclaiming to be this Messiah. Whatever Jesus may have said, it is clear that these early Apostles were wondering in their hearts about who this Jesus may be. Could it be that he was the one? As they clean their nets, they listen and wonder. They are moved to the core. Following Jesus after listening to him preach makes perfect sense.

Luke gives us another powerful reason why they left everything behind to follow Jesus. The passage tells us that “When Jesus had finished speaking, he said to Simon, ‘Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.’” This was a silly request, but pulling into “deeper” water points to unexplored possibilities. It points to potential beyond what people can see and feel. Perhaps there was a portion of the lake they hadn’t fished yet. Perhaps the scarcity of catching nothing was not the result of a lack of fish, but a sign that they needed to try something new, that they needed to explore different ways of fishing and different areas of the lake. Now, even though everybody knows that you fish in the very early hours of the morning, when the water is cooler, and fish are more likely to come to the surface, Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

Having no catch meant great scarcity for the fishermen and the village. It means, no food for their families, no money to pay employees, no profits from the sale of fish to satisfy all other necessities of life. The exhausted fishermen had been out all night, but had caught nothing. Imagine their disappointment and worry. Perhaps out of curiosity, they put out into deeper waters. They had nothing to lose at this point. As soon as they cast their nets, “they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.” As with the turning of the water into wine in Cana, we see great abundance in this passage. Almost an exaggerated sense of abundance. There is such a plenteous catch that they needed help from their partners, Zebedee and his sons. All this abundance meant a great blessing for their families and the village who depended on this fish for their very survival. This was a huge sign of Jesus’ power.

This story would have spread rather quickly because such a catch was miraculous. In fact, the catch is so spectacular that Simon Peter fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" This is similar to the cry of Isaiah in today’s OT reading, “Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips and live among people of unclean lips!” Or Paul saying in 1 Corinthians 15, “I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” Peter acknowledges what others have acknowledged before him. Standing before God’s awesome power, God’s prophets often feel inadequate, insufficient, and deeply stained by sin. It is at this point

that Jesus said, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." After they had returned to the shore, they left everything and followed him.

So, in Luke, the first Apostles follow Jesus because they had heard his words as he preached to the crowds and because they had seen his acts of power. They had come face to face with a power that was mysterious and compelling all at once and they were captivated by this power. They followed Jesus not because they had all the answers to their questions, but because they suspected there was great power in this man. When they first followed, they didn't know what "fishing for people" meant. They learned as they went, and by then end, we have evidence that their fishing expeditions were kind, personal, relational, and highly effective. We know that by the end of the first century there were over a million Christians around the world. This was an incredible catch, but it took place one person at a time. They built relationships and showed people what Jesus meant for them in their lives, and little by little, their testimony became as attractive and compelling as Jesus' own words and actions. People could not resist the pull of this Jesus in their lives. This Jesus meant freedom and restoration. He meant abundance and life.

This pattern teaches us a few lessons today. First, we don't need to have all answers to follow Jesus. All we need is faith that at some point Jesus will supply the answers we need. We must be willing to step into ambiguity and leave the rest to Jesus. Second, we don't go into the mission field blindly. We have heard Jesus' words and we have seen his acts of power in our lives, just like the Apostles heard his words and saw his miracles. Catching people is a matter of relationship building and sharing with people what we have heard and what we have seen. We once were lost and then were found. There have been times when we were surrounded by great scarcity, but through God's blessings we have found the great abundance of God in Jesus. This abundance has filled our lives with hope and love. We have experienced what forgiveness and freedom feel like, and now we can share our story of salvation and redemption with others who need to hear these words. Third, we must find the deeper waters of the lake, waters we haven't explored. There are areas filled with people who haven't heard and seen what we have heard and seen. The lake is full of hungry and thirsty people, and it is our duty to befriend them and bring them to Jesus. This is our charge today: Act in faith, share our story, and explore the deep waters we haven't explored. If we do these three things, Jesus will bless our mission and will fill this nave (from the Latin Navis, which means boat) with so many people that we will soon be surrounded by great abundance.

So, have faith, share your story, and watch for unexplored deep areas. Do this and God will do the rest. Amen!