

“Follow and Fish”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Luke 5:1-11

It had been a long night for Simon and his crew. Throw the nets out, haul the nets in. Time and time again, they came up empty. As dawn approached, they headed for shore, disappointed and frustrated with their fruitless night’s labor.

As they sat cleaning their nets, a teacher came along with a large crowd in tow. “I’m Jesus,” he said, “Do you mind if I borrow your boat?” Well, it was a great honor to help someone like Jesus. After all, he had a big crowd following him, which meant he must have been important, or at least very popular. So they readily agreed, and with Jesus on board, they put out a little way from the shore, so the crowd would not crush him.

From there, Jesus taught. Luke doesn’t tell us he said, but when Jesus finished, he said to Simon, “Let’s go fishing,” and we can imagine the whole crew groaning, “The fish have fled. We’ve been out here all night. It’s pointless.” But they relented, because teachers like Jesus were wise and deserved the benefit of the doubt.

We know the rest of the story, how they hauled up so many fish that their nets nearly broke; how the fish filled their boat and another boat until they both began to sink under the weight. It was an astonishing catch, and what it meant for them was food on their tables and money in their pockets. This was probably the fastest and largest haul of fish in memory in their community. Talk about a fish story to tell.

Of course, not all of them were ready to boast. Simon somehow sensed that the presence of Jesus made this marvelous thing happen. He was humbled and scared and

insisted that Jesus get away from him, “for I am a sinful man!” But Jesus wasn’t having any of that. “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” In other words, you haven’t seen anything yet.

This story is not so much about a miraculous catch of fish as it is about the recruitment of the first disciples of Jesus. They were chosen, not because of any special merit. In fact, scripture doesn’t really say why Jesus chose these men instead of others. With an immense crowd standing by, there was no shortage of people to choose from. For whatever reason, Jesus invited these fishermen to become the first to join him on his journey in a special role.

They accepted with surprising quickness. According to Luke, “they left everything and followed him.” One presumes that even the very valuable catch of fish was left in the boats. What had delighted them only moments ago now meant nothing, because they felt a higher calling that drew them away from the daily rhythm of life. Imagine the clarity of insight and intensity of feeling that must have motivated them to make such great sacrifices to follow Jesus.

However, the summons that lured the original disciples away from their nets was never meant for just them alone. Though they hold pride of place as the first to follow Jesus with such utter dedication, the summons echoes still, down through the centuries, to us today. We might be tempted to resist, insisting, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful person!” But Jesus replies, “Give me a break. You think I didn’t already know that? Besides, looking around, I don’t see anything but sinners.”

Yes, we too have been chosen to follow Jesus closely, and each day, we need to choose to keep following, through prayer and study and worship and service. And in the

midst of all that we do to follow Jesus, we must always remember the core purpose of our calling. “From now on you will be catching people.”

And that’s the really unnerving part about following Jesus. It’s one thing to follow with the crowd from place to place and soak up the wise teaching and witness the amazing miracles. It’s quite another to follow Jesus as a disciple and participate in the process of helping make new Christians and of supporting practicing Christians to become even better Christians. This is what each of us is called to do, in different ways.

Now that may seem like an awful lot of trouble, and some people struggle to overcome their sense of unworthiness, but that struggle and the trouble are definitely worth it. If you’ve ever been fishing, you know how satisfying it can be to reel them in as fast as you can bait your hook. We’re not always so blessed. Sometimes, the fish just don’t bite. The people don’t bite, but on those really good days, it’s awesome.

Now when we accept the invitation to become fishers of people, we need to know a few things, first of all: no Jesus, no fish; no Jesus, no people. The presence of Jesus is the only thing that will attract people to the boat, and we need to focus on that. We live in a world full of distraction that tempts us to divert our energy toward less worthy pursuits, but our purpose here is to reveal and manifest the presence of Jesus – the most meaningful way any of us could use our time.

I think we do that well. People consistently tell me that they come here and can feel the love of the Jesus flowing through our community. That’s a great blessing, one we should celebrate and treasure and nurture at all costs. Yet we need to stay mindful: no Jesus, no people. People will climb aboard this boat for as long as Jesus stays at the heart of who we are as a community of faith.

Second, those who accept the invitation to become fishers of people need to realize that it may get scary at times. The abundance of Jesus can nearly swamp us. Great things are happening at St. Luke's, and when great things happen, some things change. It can feel overwhelming, like we'll be submerged beneath God's generosity, how he's working among us doing. Our nets stretch, and it can feel a little tense sometimes.

We need to accept that when Jesus is your fishing buddy, life can be unpredictable, impractical, and somewhat scary, but life with Jesus is also liberating, exciting, and rarely boring. Jesus carries us beyond our daily routines, lifts us out of ruts, and shows us new horizons of thought and feeling, when we go fishing with him.

Third, when we fish with Jesus, we often need to drop our nets into deep water. Growing up, our family often went fishing at Lake Malone, down in Muhlenberg County, and we'd take our little boat into a cove thick with submerged boulders and fallen trees. My parents cast their lines right where they wanted, but despite their best efforts to teach me how, I spent most of my time tugging my line out of snags. But that's where we fished, there in the shallows, because that's where the fish were most concentrated.

They came to the shallows for warmth and food and for the shelter of those tangled branches. I always wondered what it would be like to cast my line in the depths of that lake, and from time to time, I'd move to the other side of the boat and try it, but never caught a thing. And after a while, I gave up.

The temptation we often face is to fish only in the shallows, where there are hungry people already looking for spiritual food, for God, and we *should* fish there avidly. But we also need to remember that Jesus encourages us to drop our nets into deep

water, where it's dark and cold, where the lost and the forgotten and the outcast languish. Jesus calls us to take the extra trouble to reach out and bring in those who have been abandoned and neglected. Jesus calls us to reach out and bring in those who have been burned or bruised by a telling of the Gospel that emphasizes the letter of the Law rather than the Spirit of love.

So let's fish in the depths, not just in the shallows, and not be afraid, despite the risk that comes with following Jesus. Let's say, "Yes," because Jesus first said "Yes" to us. Let's choose Jesus, because he first chose us. Let's accept the invitation to follow Jesus and fish with him for people. We've got good bait here. The Gospel's alive, and there are so many dying, too many drowning in a sea of loneliness and despair, a sea of fear and hatred, of confusion and ignorance. It's our job to get them into the boat. That's why we're here.

Our core purpose goes beyond just us, beyond those who take the initiative and jump aboard. It goes to those who haven't starting looking for God, to people who don't see the point, who can't fathom their need. That's what being a disciple is about. It's about harboring Jesus and inviting people into the boat, so they can fish with us. So all hands on deck, and ready your nets. It's time to go fishing. Amen.