



“Following Jesus”
February 14, 2010
Luke 5:1-11

Sixty miles northeast of Jerusalem is the body of water known as the Sea of Galilee. As our group of Westminster pilgrims discovered when we walked its shoreline, it’s not really a sea, but a freshwater lake; the largest lake in Israel and the lowest freshwater lake on earth. The Bible gives it several names. The Gospel of John calls it the Sea of Tiberias and the Gospel of Luke refers to it as the lake of Gennesaret, each gospel writer naming it after a prominent city located on its shores in ancient times. In the first century, the lake had a reputation for good fishing. Today, it is a main source of water, that precious commodity in this mostly arid land.

Jesus conducted much of his ministry in this area, and in today’s passage we read that Jesus is standing at the water’s edge teaching a crowd of people who have come out to hear him. As he speaks, the crowd swells. Hoping not to miss a word and to catch a glimpse of him, the people edge ever closer.

Jesus keeps backing up until he is about to topple into the lake. He spots two boats on the shore where the men have just come in from fishing and he asks the owner of one of the boats if he will row him out a short distance from the shore to open a little breathing room. Jesus climbs into the boat, the man and his crew row out a short way and Jesus resumes teaching the crowd.

Once he wraps up his talk, Jesus turns to the boat owner, a man at this point known only as Simon, and instructs him to throw his fishing nets into the deep water. “Go ahead, try your luck one more time.”

Simon recognizes Jesus as an extraordinary teacher, calling him ‘Master,’ but Simon questions his knowledge of fishing. He says, “Master, we have been fishing all night and we haven’t caught anything.” Common sense suggests that it is time to go home and get some rest, but Simon complies. Perhaps Jesus kept insisting and Simon finally surrendered. Or, perhaps Simon decided to prove to Jesus that they just weren’t going to catch any fish that day. So, one last toss of the nets.

Even today, after years of motor boats, the lake has beautiful, clear water. So, it’s easy to imagine the fishermen watching the nets as they slowly sink until they are finally out of sight.

“All right, men,” Simon says, “Pull in the nets.”

He hears groans, but the men don’t seem to obey his order. “Pull in the nets,” he says again.

And one of them shouts, “We can’t!”

The nets are so full of fish they cannot lift them, so they signal their partners in the other boat to come quickly and help them land this enormous catch. The other boat joins them, and Luke tells us that both boats are so full of fish that they nearly sink.

Well, I've heard some good fish stories over the years, but no one has ever told me that they had caught so many fish their boat almost sank! It's a whopper of a tale and if you favor supernatural miracles, this one fits the bill.

Another message we might glean from this passage is: If things are not going well and you're about to throw in the towel, hang in there, cast your nets one more time; this might be the one that succeeds.

That may be the central point of this passage IF we stop reading at verse seven. However, if we keep reading, we discover Simon's reaction to this mother lode of fish. He does not call for a super celebration and tell his friends that he's buying the first round. The passage says: "When Simon Peter saw (the catch), he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!'"

After landing the catch of a lifetime, you would think Peter would be ecstatic. We might expect him to say, "Tell me, Jesus, how long are you planning to stay around here? I'll be glad to row you out into the lake any time you'd like." But that's not how Peter reacted. Instead of being thrilled, he was afraid. Why?

Jesus was compelling; his words about God were passionate and promising. Perhaps Peter was afraid because he could feel himself being drawn by the magnetic personality of Jesus. As a fisherman, he would have been a muscular man and an independent soul. He did not labor for anyone else. *He* decided when to shove his boat out to fish. *He* decided when to call it a day. He was his own master and did not have to answer to anyone else. However, that day when Peter rowed his boat out so that Jesus could stand in it and speak to the crowd, Jesus' wisdom and charisma snagged Peter. And as Jesus reeled him in, Peter could feel himself losing control of his life.

And yet, Peter had a choice. He was not under some mystical spell in which his personal freedom evaporated. Jesus did not coerce Peter to follow him; he invited Peter to follow him. Suddenly and without warning, Peter found himself at the most critical crossroad of his life. He could continue with what was comfortable and remain a fisherman, or he could risk it all on the promises of this compelling prophet. He could remain in his own village and keep his same friends, or he could walk away from it all and step into a new future. He could stick with the predictable or he could move into the unknown.

Is it any wonder Luke tells us that Peter was afraid? He was scared of making the wrong decision. He could continue his routine and eek out a living or he could shoot the moon. Becoming a follower of this amazing teacher sounded exciting, but what if Jesus' promise of a rich life turned out to be fool's gold?

I grew up imagining that Jesus issued an invitation to the 12 men he intended to have as his inner circle, and each one enthusiastically replied, "Yes, of course I'll throw my lot with you!" But, today I doubt it. If Jesus led by persuasion not force, if he challenged, but did not coerce, I wonder how many other people were extended invitations, but replied, "No thanks. My life may not be perfect, but I'm not desperate for a change. The promise of a richer life is enticing, but where's the guarantee? I'm afraid to let loose of the security and the predictability of my routine for something unfamiliar. Granted, Jesus, you make it sound rewarding, but how can I be sure?"

I wonder how many people said, "Thanks, but no thanks." Three of the gospels tell the story of a wealthy young ruler who was invited to become a follower of Jesus, but walked away. I wonder how many others declined the invitation.

Over the past 20 centuries, how many people have stood at that crossroad, but chose the wrong path? And how many of us have committed to following Christ, but at important junctures we have veered off course?

Following Jesus entails adopting *his* agenda, which to some people sounds threatening or overly restrictive. However, when we adopt the agenda of Jesus, it does not mean giving up fun for something boring; giving up excitement for dreariness or spontaneity for rigidity. It means looking outward rather than inward; it means following his way rather than responding to selfish impulses.

A cartoon in the New Yorker showed two attractive people sitting at a table in a coffee shop.

The man is saying to the woman, "I've tried a lot of strategies, and I've discovered that being completely self-serving is the strategy that works best for me."

"It's all about me" theology permeates our society. Regrettably, it fails to see that self-centeredness cuts you off from others, limits your vision and restricts your possibilities. Self-centeredness is blind to the rewards that ensue from making a sacrifice for another. It does not understand the genuine well-being that emerges from being grateful to God for the blessings of life.

It never experiences the power of forgiveness and transformation. It cannot fathom the satisfaction that is derived from making a commitment to something greater than yourself.

Adopting the agenda of Jesus moves you beyond momentary pleasures to long-lasting satisfaction. In addition to happiness, you discover joy; in addition to fun, you find peace; in addition to optimism, you acquire hope.

We live in an age where most people shy away from commitments. Yet, people long for a better marriage, hunger for stronger friendships, ache for a purpose for their lives and pray for a sense of harmony with God – all of which only derive from making commitments.

Like Peter, are you afraid of the changes that might ensue if you commit to following Christ wherever he leads you? Like Peter, are you afraid to get too close to God?

For 13 years, William Willimon was the campus chaplain for Duke University. He says that in all those years, he only received two or three telephone calls from parents who were anxious about their child becoming sexually promiscuous or addicted to alcohol. However, he received more than a dozen calls from angry parents who said they had sent their child to Duke to go to law school or medical school and he/she had become a religious fanatic. “Religious fanatic” meant she wants to go on a mission trip to a developing country to work with the poor.¹

He recalls an informational meeting one fall semester for the student mission trip to Honduras which would occur the following spring. Most students who went on the trips experienced a significant change in their lives. They were never the same persons as before the trip.

A couple of months after the initial meeting, Willimon spoke to a young man who was especially excited. He said that he had met Marianne at the meeting and the two had started dating.

He said, “We’re going to Honduras and who knows where it might lead us?”

Just before the Christmas break, the chaplain ran into the young man again. He had a very dejected look on his face, and so the chaplain asked him what was the matter.

He replied, “Marianne can’t go to Honduras.”

“I’m sorry. Why not?”

“Her parents won’t let her go. Her sister took the trip a few years ago and it changed her. It made her mom and dad furious. Her sister says, ‘I finally became a committed Christian.’ Her parents say, ‘It turned her upside down.’”²

You can never be certain what will happen to you if you commit to following Christ. That’s what makes it scary; but it’s also what can make life an adventure. God wants us to take bold steps of faith, and to follow where Christ leads. That will involve taking some risks and doing some things we might not have previously considered. Just keep in mind there are some big catches to be landed, so why not cast your net out into the deep water?

NOTES

1. From a sermon by William Willimon entitled, *The Dangers of Going to Church*, preached January 19, 1997.
2. *Upside Down Christmas* preached by William Willimon on December 24, 1995.