

Luke 5:1-11

Luke 5:1 Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, 2 he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 3 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. 4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” 5 Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” 6 When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. 7 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. 8 But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” 9 For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; 10 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.” 11 When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

DON'T BE AFRAID

Don't be afraid.

This is a command that we find throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament this was often the message that God gave his people in a time of trouble. Don't be afraid. I will deliver you from your enemies.

It was the message that the angel brought Mary when she learned that she would be the mother of our Lord. Don't be afraid.

It was the message that the heavenly host brought the shepherds when they saw the glory of the Lord in the sky as they proclaimed the birth of our Lord. Don't be afraid.

It was the message that the risen Christ brought Mary at the empty tomb. And in the early Christian church Paul often encouraged his people by saying, "Have no anxiety about anything."

Don't be afraid. When I looked this up in the concordance I learned that this particular phrase occurs over sixty seven times in the Bible.

And yet, we are afraid. We are anxious. We are uncertain. It would not be too much to say that our lives are often ruled by our fears and our anxieties.

And this affects our ability to follow Jesus.

Last week we learned that the fears of the people at Nazareth kept them from hearing the gospel. They were scared to death of a gospel that included people outside of their home town. They were scared to death of a gospel that so radically transformed their understanding of the kingdom of God.

It wasn't a pretty sight when the synagogue crowd chased him to the cliff, but Jesus walked away from them, passing right through them to new places where people would trust good news to be good.

This is what happens when people let fear get the best of them. It turns to anger and rejection. And so if we are going to stay close to Jesus this is the first lesson a disciple must learn. Don't be afraid.

In today's lesson we learn that Peter and the first disciples were afraid as well. If they were going to follow Jesus, it would be necessary for them to get over their fears. Jesus would lead them into deep water. And many times it would look like their boat might sink.

So, Jesus gave them this command at the very beginning of their ministry together. Don't be afraid.

And Jesus gives us that same command.

If there would be one piece of advice that I could give those who are being installed as officers today it would be this: "Don't be afraid."

Don't make decisions on the basis of what might go wrong. Don't always worry about the water being too deep or the boat being too small to carry the load. Make decisions based upon what God is calling you to do.

Jesus can help us handle the deep water. Jesus can keep our boat from sinking.

If we trust our very soul to the salvation of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, if we believe that the final enemy, death has already been defeated, then why are we afraid. As the Apostle Paul once put it, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

And yet despite the testimony of the prophets, the angels and Jesus that there is no reason to fear; we are still afraid. We are still reluctant to push out into deep water.

We are still reluctant to try something new and leave behind the old way of life behind.

What can we do to lessen our fear and increase our faith? It might help to analyze the fears of those first disciples because I suspect that their fears are also ours. Why were they afraid? And why are we afraid.

AFRAID OF OUR SIN

The holiness of God made them aware of their own sinfulness. Peter said,

“Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

His awe is translated well by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*,

"I'm a sinner and can't handle this holiness. Leave me to myself."

This statement reminds me of what Isaiah said when he received his call to be a prophet. You'll remember that Isaiah saw the Lord in the Temple "high and lofty." This was a full blown vision of holiness. And Isaiah said, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

The presence of God reminded these disciples that they were sinners and fell far short of the glory of God. And that was true. Peter was right. He was a sinful man.

But, sending the Lord away is not the cure for our sinfulness. Adam and Eve tried to hide from God but it didn't work. And it won't work for us either. The guilt of past sins can hold us hostage. Indeed, I have found that to one degree or another the sins of the past do hold all of us hostage.

But, the answer is not to send Jesus away. The answer is to come to Jesus, let him take that burden from us and then lead us in a new direction.

Jesus tells us, "Don't be afraid. Your sins are forgiven."

AFRAID OF OUR WEAKNESS

There is another reason that the disciples were afraid. The presence of God made them aware of their own limitations.

Recent archeological discoveries suggest that these fishermen had some decent sized boats ... 27 feet by 7 feet. And these guys made a good living with these boats. They had seen it all (they thought) and were ready for anything.

But, when the boats filled up with fish and began to sink, those big boats looked mighty small, and those fishermen felt mighty small as well.

Our understanding of God is always too small, and our understanding of ourselves is always too large. We think that our boats, our lives are big and important. But, then something happens to show us just how small and powerless we really are. Our boat begins to sink and we are afraid.

Jesus told his disciples. Don't put your faith in the size of your boat. Put your faith in the salvation of the Lord. When your boat begins to sink, reach out to him. You may remember that the disciples had to learn this lesson over and over again. And, in a way they never fully learned the lesson.

Isn't this true of us as well? We will trust anyone or anything before we trust the Lord. But, gently and persistently through the rough and tumble of life our Lord offers us hope when we find ourselves on a sinking ship. He tells us, "Don't be afraid. I am with you."

A sinking ship can be a source of despair. But, a sinking ship can be an opportunity to trust in something more substantial.

Have you seen that commercial which asks, “Will our children refer to this time as the great depression or will they call it the depression that made us great?” In other words, sometimes we learn what is really important during the tough times. We grow when we are forced to grow.

Looking at this from a spiritual standpoint we can say that sometimes tough times teach us to trust in God instead of ourselves.

Is your ship sinking? Don't be afraid. Jesus is with you. And he is greater than any problem you may have.

AFRAID OF EVANGELISM

The third reason for fear is that Jesus requires us to go into deep water and fish in a new way. In our lesson for today the boats of the fishermen were moored by the edge of the water as they cleaned their nets. They had fished all night and had caught nothing.

But, Jesus uses their boat in a new way. The press of the crowd is so great that Jesus is unable to speak to the crowd.

So Jesus asks Peter to take him in the boat just a little way from the land in the shallow water. And from there Jesus teaches the crowd. In essence Jesus uses this fishing boat to fish for men and woman; it is a pulpit from which he can proclaim the kingdom of God.

And when Jesus quits teaching the crowd he tells Peter, “Put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

Those of you who are fishermen know that the best time to fish is when it is still dark and the fish are not frightened away by your shadow. But, Jesus has the fishermen put out to the deep in the middle of the day when the fish are resting in the cool depths and are unlikely to be running.

But, when Peter and the disciples do as Jesus says, their big boat is filled with fish. In fact, as we noted before their boat is overfilled with fish to the point that the boat is beginning to sink.

This miracle of the big catch becomes the sign of Christ’s call to discipleship. When Jesus comes into our life, we are encouraged to go into deep water and fish in a way that we have never tried before. And when we do this the bounty of God’s grace is overwhelming. None of us can

out give God. No matter how large our boat; it is filled to the point of sinking.

And yet many of us are afraid to go fishing with Jesus? We want to play around in the shallow water of life, but when he calls us to put out into the deep, when he calls us to get in over our heads, then we hesitate.

When Jesus calls us to do something in a new way, like those first disciples we protest. “Lord we’ve been working as hard as we can. We’ve done our best, but we have no results. Perhaps it would be best to clean our nets and go home.”

In John’s gospel there’s a story similar to this one. The disciples see the risen Christ, but their lives are not totally changed by the experience. In fact they go back to where they began with Jesus. They go back to fishing.

And once again the results are not so good. They fish all night and catch nothing. And in the morning mist they see a man on the shore. They can’t make out who he is but this man on the shore tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat.

They do it, and once again the nets fill up with fish. And it is at this point that Peter recognizes that it is the Lord.

He jumps into the water and swims to shore ... leaving his fellow disciples to struggle with the big catch.

Peter got the message. The miracle wasn't about fish. The miracle was about God's call to be fishers of men and women. The miracle was about God's call to follow Jesus and proclaim the good news of God's kingdom ... a kingdom of forgiveness and grace.

Sometimes we too go back to the old ways of fishing. We become bogged down with the details of ministry and lose sight of the big picture. What is our primary function? What are we called to do?

We are called to go into the deep water and let down our nets. We, all of us are called to fish for souls.

Now this makes people in the mainline church very nervous. Every time we bring this up in Bible study you can see the anxiety on the faces of the people around the table. They say, "Surely that doesn't mean we're to be like those crazy folks who go door to door and harangue their neighbors about religion."

No, that's not what it means. God does not call us to be a pest. But, God does call us to be a witness. And this takes many forms.

We must be willing to listen for the voice of Jesus. He still calls us to cast our nets. He still calls us to tell our story of faith in the deep water. He still calls us to tell others about God's love in a world where love is in short supply.

Now some will no doubt find this to be a fearful task. They will say, "I've tried this many times, and I was unsuccessful. In fact some of my neighbors even got angry at me. Perhaps it would be best if I just stayed on the shore and cleaned my nets for a while."

And Jesus tells us, "Try one more time. Do it a bit differently. Cast your nets in the deep water on the other side of the boat, and you may be surprised at what happens."

More than one missionary or pastor has spent many years preaching the gospel with seemingly little to show for their efforts. But, years later they come back to that place of ministry and learn to their utter surprise that a boatload of fish have been caught for the cause of Christ.

I have found this to be true in my own ministry. I am amazed at what God has done with my meager efforts.

Don't worry about results. Worry about faithfulness. Proclaim the gospel in good times and in bad, and you

will be overwhelmed at what God can do. Don't be afraid. Take your boat into deep water and cast your net for Jesus.

AFRAID OF CHANGE

The fourth reason for fear is that the presence of Jesus almost always requires us to go in a new direction. The fishermen were amazed at the large catch, but this is not a fish story.

It's a story about how fishermen are transformed into disciples. They will soon undergo a change of vocation. Instead of fishing for fish, soon they too will be fishing for men and women. They too will be evangelists for the kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus.

Surely this must have been a source of fear as well. Have you ever been called to a new job? Have you ever been called to leave the city you love and all your friends and start all over again in a new place? It's frightening. It creates uncertainty.

Sometimes the gospels make this transition sound too easy. For example, today's lesson puts it in one simple sentence. "When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him."

Just like that their lives changed forever. And yet we know that this sacrifice was always on their minds.

Later on when Jesus is talking about the cost of discipleship, Peter tells Jesus, “We have left everything and followed you.” (Mark 10:28) The disciples were well aware of the fact that following Jesus was a tremendous risk and a great sacrifice. That fear of losing it all was always on their minds.

And yet Jesus tells them from the very beginning and all along the way, “Don’t be afraid. What you gain will be greater than what you leave behind.”

The disciples had big boats that they didn’t want to leave behind, and the same is true for us. We too have our big boats, our sources of livelihood and security. It would take a lot for us to walk away from them.

But, Jesus calls us to do just that. Jesus calls us to boldly leave everything and follow him. Jesus invites us to put our trust in the Great Fisherman instead of our big boats.

ANOTHER CALL STORY

This past week the Committee on Ministry welcomed a new pastor into our Presbytery, a man by the name of Dennis Adamson. Dennis felt called to serve as a

chaplain in a jail ministry, and we were happy to confirm that call.

I found his story of faith particularly compelling. Dennis, like many of us grew up in the church but then his vocation and family took priority. In fact he drifted away from the church. He said that he thought he had it made. He had a job that he loved, a wife that he loved and three great children.

But, one night his boat began to sink. A drunk driver had turned his car over on the interstate. The battery from this car was thrown up into the air and came flying into the car that Dennis and his family drove. His 29 year old wife and 18 month old son were killed instantly.

Dennis was in deep water. Now he had to raise two children by himself. Like the prodigal son he returned to God and found that his heavenly Father had been waiting for him all along.

But, that great joy soon turned to trouble again. He married too soon out of loneliness and that marriage didn't last. His 17 year old son was arrested on burglary charges and spent one year in jail and six months in prison.

But, he said God continued to bring him great joy. Dennis did find a new wife, and he found a church where he could grow in grace.

Then, once again the storm came. His son who had previously been in jail developed cancer and later died. But, before his death this son became a Christian.

Dennis wrote, “I watched in amazement as he was changed into a new creature in Christ. I had sensed a call to the ministry before but Matt’s experience convinced me it was time to get the job done.”

Dennis finished his seminary education and had plans to serve a church in Virginia as a director of Christian education. But, those his plans were changed again.

He had a conversation with someone who ran a jail ministry, and he said, “Your experience would make you perfect to be a chaplain in this ministry.”

And so Dennis found that the deep water of his life became a place where he could let down his nets and fish for Jesus.

Dennis closed his statement of faith by saying,

“Inmates often tell me that they have ‘life verses’. I have selected one for myself. It’s Romans 8:28. ‘And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.’ How many things? All things. God has used even trouble and sorrow in my life for my good and his glory.

Had I not experienced the deaths of my first wife and young son, I still might be living under the false assumption that I am in control of my life. And had I not witnessed the glorious transformation of my oldest son, I would not be in ministry today. All praise to God who orders our steps.”

Some people think that they don’t have a ministry. Some people don’t sense the call of Christ.

I would suggest that your call begins when your boat begins to sink in deep water.

Where is the deep water in your life? Don’t be afraid of it. God can and will use these life changing experiences as an opportunity for ministry.

Let down your nets in the deep water of your life and watch in amazement as God brings in the catch.
Amen.