

Sermon - Feb 6 2022

“Because you say so, Master”

Gospel reading: Luke 5:1-11

On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on [Jesus] to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, **“Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.”** And Simon answered, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, **“Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.”** And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

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Once again we see the crowds pushing in on Jesus, and in this case we see Jesus put physical space between himself and the crowds, by getting into a boat and pushing a little way off shore. Then we see him use this as an opportunity for an object lesson, which results in a miraculous catch of fish. A catch so great that other boats had to be called into the event to help handle the catch and even they are in danger of swamping because there are so many fish.

Peter's reaction to this miracle is to fall to his knees in repentance and ask Jesus to leave. But the Lord reassures him and encourages him not to be afraid. And then he gives him work to do in his kingdom... No longer will he catch fish, he will become a catcher of men. And Peter's response is to set aside his old life and profession and follow Jesus.

Lots of things catch my attention in this story but the main one that I want to dwell on this week is this...

*“And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, **“Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.”***

And Simon answered, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.”

Simon calls Jesus “Master” and I think that sounds strange to American audiences, because we don't often use that title as a pronoun... a name. We tend to use it as an adjective, a descriptor, referring to someone's skill level within a discipline, such as a master builder, or master gardener or master painter... or within a degree such as a Master of Arts or Sciences. Someone who is a master carpenter is an expert builder with wood. In this case, Jesus is recognized as a master theologian. He is often called Rabbi, meaning teacher, but here it's much more like “Professor.”

This title shows us that Peter held Jesus in high regard for his expertise as a religious teacher. And here we see just how highly Peter held Jesus as a religious authority... *“Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.”* What I think that Peter is saying here, and I'm not alone in this, is something like this... *“You are the Master of Religion, without a doubt. But we are*

experienced and professional fishermen. We know how to catch fish. If the fish were biting we would have caught them. Now... I'm not telling you how to do your job... but I'm just explaining to you that letting down our nets right now is not going to produce much of a catch if any... BUT... JUST because YOU ask us to do so... and we have great respect for YOU and your authority in general... we will do as you say... but don't say we didn't warn you."

Peter and the other fishermen were MORE than doubtful that they were going to catch anything. They were being asked to cast their nets... already nicely stowed away... into a location that they KNEW did not have any fish in it. All their knowledge and experience TOLD them there were not any fish there. Why on earth would they bother casting their nets THERE? They had already tried it... all night long... nothing... And the ONLY REASON they were willing to do this was because Jesus TOLD THEM TO. And they DID IT ... KNOWING that it wasn't going to work. Or let me say it another way... KNOWING it WASN'T GOING TO WORK... they did it ANYWAY. Why? Because Jesus told them to and for no other reason.

And we see the results. And So DID THEY. And they were so humbled by this they fell to their knees. Then Jesus tells them that this is their new JOB. They are always going to do this... Cast their nets around their boats when and where Jesus tells them to cast them...

This rule hasn't changed, brothers and sisters, It's still what his disciples are called to do. It doesn't matter if we think that it's going to bear fruit or not... We still do it. And we do it for the same reason.

"But at your word, we will let down the nets." "Because YOU SAY SO, MASTER, we your servants, will follow."

What has changed from that day to this? Nothing. At least not in terms of the directive. It's still the same mission.

Only the location has changed.

In re-reading *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, I was reminded of this train of thought.

"We are in uncharted terrain, trying to lead aging churches through a post-Christian landscape that views the church as an out of touch, irrelevant relic of the past."

One of the authors of this book made a connection between taking flight lessons, that is learning to pilot an airplane, when he asked his instructor why they were spending so much time on the flight simulators rather than actually flying. The instructor answered, "Because... In the moment of crisis, you will NOT rise to the occasion. In that moment you will default to what you know. You will fall back on your experiences and you will rely on what you were trained to do."

So true. For most of us in ministry, our defaults... those things that always worked so well for us in the past, the tried and true... when they stop working we become discouraged. So what do we do? We talk longer, we preach more, we try harder, we reach into our bag of tricks and pull out our best programs, we offer a personal touch. But the landscape has changed. What worked before, doesn't fit the new terrain. It's very hard to be the answer man, when you don't recognize the questions any more. And quite possibly no one knows what to do... except that we must move forward.

When the Lewis and Clark expedition ran into the mountains, they had to leave their boats behind, hire guides and continue forward – on foot, if necessary. They were off the map. Guides into this new territory were a necessary expense, as were pack animals. Someday, in the future, they would need to build boats again. But for the foreseeable future, life-jackets and canoes were pointless.

I think of it like this: The church that I grew up in, the church that I was trained to serve, was like tubing on a lazy river. We all floated together down river. We had lots of fun, we didn't have to work real hard to go anywhere because the river naturally carried us along. There were some bad spots in the river, the occasional tree or snake. But for the most part life on the lazy river was pretty easy going. But it's like we've turned the corner and we noticed something is changing. There are rapids up ahead and floating down river in an innertube isn't going to work. It isn't safe and we need to change our attitude toward what we are doing on the river. Floating lazy isn't safe, or even the right thing to do.

Situations change... and we have to adapt or die. That's not an over statement. That is a law of nature. We live in the natural world. And that world has changed significantly in just a few short years. There is a section of the Rogue River north of Grand Rapids that I'm just now reminded of... there the river widens out and flattens into a peaceful picnic spot, and then in just a few hundred feet narrows down and becomes shallower and rocky. It's fast water, although I wouldn't call it rapids; the thing I remember is how quickly the current changes. I prefer a canoe over an innertube for several reasons and this is one of them. It's so much easier to reorient yourself to the new situation. And there is just more protection in general.

Point is... we wake up one day and realize everything has changed and we have to adapt to the changes. And that means our routines will change and the way we get ready will change. I remember what it was like after I graduated high school and started my commute to Grand Rapids Junior College while trying to work out what I was going to do with my life. How intimidating it was just to find parking downtown. Learning in small steps how to get to class. It was hard. But it didn't stay hard. Somehow I adapted. And when I look back, I remember how much agonizing went into my plans, and yet my life didn't turn out in *any* fashion according to *my* plans. Some of my plans might have had some bearing on how things turned out, but mostly I would point to God and His plan and tell you to go about your life as though you had control. But stay open to following the Master's voice... even when you think you have all the answers, all the experience and know better what works and what doesn't.

Because when God tells you to let down the nets... here or there... we should answer AS YOU WISH.