

Text: Luke 5: 1-11
Title: Into Deep Waters
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In the early 1940s, Lew Smedes left a job in a Detroit steel factory, hitchhiked to Muskegon, took a Greyhound to Chicago, and enrolled in Moody Bible Institute. During his tenure at Moody, he learned the rules: no dating during the first semester, suit coats and ties in classroom and cafeteria, and weekly reports about time spent in prayer, how many gospel tracts he'd given away, and how many souls he'd saved. Wanting to succeed, he tried to keep the rules. But he writes this:

The reputation that most students prized was that they had a "passion for souls" and were "on fire for the Lord." I did not develop a "passion for souls" and had not caught on fire, and my failure disturbed me considerably. How could I not have a passion for souls when people walking down the street at that very moment might perish forever in hell because I failed to witness to them about Jesus? Their damnation would be on my head forever. Alone in my dormitory room at night, I would ask myself: Why sit here idle when I could be out on the street witnessing to sinners who might die and go hell if I do not give them another chance to accept Christ?

That's a snapshot of a bygone era, a particular theological tradition, and a soul struggling with the call to be "fishers of men." And while it may seem quaint, I remember wondering the same....

If eternity hangs in the balance for my neighbor, and if I love my neighbor, then shouldn't I do everything I can to catch my neighbor with the good news about Jesus. If I love people, and they need a relationship with Jesus in order to be saved, how can I rest until they know Jesus? Shouldn't I do something more to hook them for Jesus?

If you were formed by an Evangelical Christian tradition our text plays an oversized role in understanding your call in this world. We're all called to follow Jesus in being fishers of men – and women. And there's a measure of guilt if you're not a good fisherman, or you can't muster up the courage to cast a line, or you're all smoke and no fire for Jesus.....

But, maybe there's another way to understand this iconic and enigmatic text. Maybe there is another way to faithfully follow Jesus in fishing.

In the cool of the morning, while fishermen were putting away their gear after a long futile night, Jesus is teaching on a crowded beach. Realizing he needs a better pulpit, he asked Simon to let him speak from his boat. The Sea of Galilee is something of a long oblong bowl. The shores gently slop up and away. The acoustics would be better with the speaker on the water and the listeners on the slop.

This was clearly an early compromise with technology for the sake of communication – beginning the long-slow-slide-down the slippery slope to screens and power-point-preaching and livestreamed church.

The Sea of Galilee is primarily fed by springs on the north end – flowing to the Jordan River on the south. A boat set in the water would drift down the lake. Therefore, either Simon anchored the boat, or with the skill of a professional oarsman he kept the boat in place, in front of the crowd. So, it seems entirely plausible that after Jesus wrapped up his sermon, he turned to Simon to tip him....

Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.

Inflection is lost in translation, and the word translated here as “Master” can just as easily be translated as “boss,” “teacher,” or someone over you in the military. So, maybe Simon, exhausted and who tended to lead with his gut, said sarcastically,

Sure ‘nough boss-man, let’s just go back out in deep water. We were out all night and didn’t catch a thing, we cleaned the nets and put them away, we’re dead-dog-tired and you’re a rabbi from the hinterlands, we do this every day, but whatever you say, boss....

And yet, they do go back out. Jesus had recently healed Simon’s mother-in-law of a high fever and maybe he wasn’t nearly as sarcastic as I’ve imagined.

Our translation puts little titles over sections of scripture. This section is labeled “Jesus Calls His First Disciples.” But there’s actually no calling. Jesus, in this passage, doesn’t invite them to follow him to fish for people. He announces. He proclaims. He says to them, more literally,

Don’t be afraid, from now on you will catch people.

And with that, they leave everything on the beach and follow him!

That’s the way it is told, however it seems unlikely that they left boatloads of freshly caught fish to rot in the midday sun. But you get the point....

Jesus doesn’t pitch a tent, enlist pitchmen, and begin an evangelical crusade. He doesn’t talk about souls and salvation; he doesn’t preach hell and damnation. Instead, he catches people in a net of love and mercy.

This text is at the front end of a long section of healings. From here, Jesus heals a man with leprosy, a paralytic, and the centurion’s sick servant. He raises the widow’s son from the dead and he heals a demon possessed man. In and among these stories are sermons about loving your enemies, not judging others, and turning the other cheek. Tucked into those stories are images of a kingdom where the poor and those who weep are called blessed.

Jesus had just announced the coming of the kingdom to his hometown friends and neighbors. Now he casts a net that catches the poor, the prisoner, the blind, and the oppressed. He casts a net that sets people free from whatever enslaves them. He casts a net that gives people the love, strength, faith and freedom they need to be more fully alive, more fully human, more fully who they were created to be.

And...

Jesus proclaims to these fishermen that they will join him in casting these nets. He doesn't go to the preachers or teachers, he doesn't invite the well-educated or the well-heeled, he tells these common fishermen that there are bigger fish to fry and they follow him out into deeper waters.

Remember Lew Smedes? He was burdened by a particular way of reading this text and understanding this mandate for mission, but he writes that a light dawned on him after his days at Moody. In his words:

A passion for souls? Any souls in particular? No, just souls in general. I couldn't help it; I didn't have that passion.

I have, over the years, developed a passion for people, not just people in general, but persons in particular, and not just for their souls. I have an honest-to-goodness passion for certain children in Los Angeles, innocent as newborn kittens, knocked around, forgotten, abandoned by their parents, and plunked into the Los Angeles Child Welfare Department, which may not be the ultimate, but still a very real, hell. I have a passion for people of my age, without memory, without hope, stuck like living corpses in dysfunctional nursing homes. I have a passion for persons I know who need to be saved from their sins so that they can go to heaven, but for now need to be saved from AIDS and saved from hunger and hopelessness.

Dear friends, this is not to dilute the call to fish for people or diminish the demand that you may know to call others unto Christ. But it strikes me that this text is of one piece with the announcement of the Kingdom.

Jesus proclaims that the "year of the Lord's favor" has dawned and that liberation extends to all people. Then Luke stacks up pictures of what that kingdom liberation looks like.

And, that's not about moving people from one side of the ledger to the other, or counting spiritual scalps on the totem pole. It's not about fishing for souls. It is about casting a net of love and mercy that liberates people from whatever it is that enslaves them.

And that net is of one piece. It's not split between evangelism and social justice. It's not works of mercy for the sake of conversion. It's not a cup of cold water in hopes of capturing a soul. It is simply following the way of Jesus in love and service. For Jesus would liberate all from whatever it is that enslaves: poverty, consumerism, competition, addiction, comfort, sin, cynicism, depression, etc.

One last thing. A friend was working on this same text. He grew up Mennonite, went to Wheaton, taught at a Reformed college, and is currently a Lutheran pastor. He emailed me, "61 years of evangelical eisegesis just exploded in my brain." And then he added:

There is perhaps no expression more traditionally misunderstood than Jesus' invitation to these workers to become 'fishers of men.' This metaphor, despite the grand old tradition of missionary interpretation, does not refer to the 'saving of souls,' as if Jesus were conferring upon these men instant evangelist status. Rather, the image is carefully

chosen from Jeremiah 16, where it is used as a symbol of Yahweh's censure of Israel. Elsewhere the 'hooking of fish' is a euphemism for judgment upon the rich (Amos 4:2) and powerful (Ezekiel 29:4). Taking this mandate for his own, Jesus is inviting common folk to join him in his struggle to overturn the existing order of power and privilege.

Dear friends, on whatever shore you find yourself, Jesus is calling you to catch people with love and mercy. He wills for us to live by the vision and values of the kingdom. And it will take all us. It will take all of our nets and boats.

Do you hear that call?

Do you know a passion for people, a particular people, a particular person?

The nets of love and mercy overflow with bounty.

There is more than enough for everybody.

Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.

Amen.