

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

To all who are loved by God and called to be saints, there is grace and peace for you – in abundance -- through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Discombobulated. Befuddled. Flabbergasted. Flummoxed. If there are ever words that sound like their meaning, it's those. And that's kind of how I've been feeling lately, in dire need of recombobulation. Where to begin? How to begin?

When you start something new, the beginning can seem daunting, almost paralyzing. Even when you begin on a Friday. Even when there is someone like Jenny Hooley helping you.

Even with all of that working for you, it's hard. You want to dig in, but you can't dig in until you first unpack. You want to get things done, but you first have to learn both what there is to do and how those things get done. Honestly, it feels like that first time when you, as a child, accidentally wandered into the deep end of the swimming pool, that moment when you realize that your toes can no longer touch the bottom and your hands are too far from the wall. At first, it's terrifying. Discombobulating.

In the deep end, you can't simply do what you've always done for safety and security. For sure, you can draw upon the skills and experiences that you've acquired along the way. But, at some point, you have to face the scary, daunting, unavoidable truth: if you're going to stay afloat, you've got to do something new. And, immediately following that truth, comes the nagging question, "Are you up to it?"

The scripture passage that we have before us from Luke, chapter 5, is one of the four lectionary texts assigned for today. It's a well-known story, of course. The calling of the first disciples. In the midst of their everyday routines and work, Jesus came to them and called them to a new beginning. Maybe it's not surprising why I felt drawn to this story about Jesus' disciples, right at their beginning. But no matter your level of bobulation, it's good for all of us to be reminded of our beginning as disciples. As disciples, where do we begin? How do we begin? And, are we up to it?

The way Luke tells it, after Jesus was baptized, after he was tempted in the desert, he returned to Galilee and began preaching, teaching, healing, and driving out demons. People were flocking to Jesus, and news about him spread through the surrounding area. One day, as Jesus was standing beside the Sea of Galilee, people were crowding around him to listen, and he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by fishermen who were washing their nets after a failed day of work. Jesus got into one of the boats and asked Simon Peter, one of the fishermen, to put the boat a little ways from the shore to give him a better platform to address the crowd. So Peter did so.

After Jesus finished speaking, he told Peter to go out into the deep water and to put down the nets. Peter did so, reluctantly. You already know what happened next. They caught so many fish that their nets began to break and, when they called a second boat out to help haul the fish, both boats were so full that they began to sink. Up to this point, this is kind of a comic story. The fishermen scrambling to keep nets intact and their boats afloat. I can imagine Jesus laughing with joy at the spectacle.

But, in Luke, Peter's response to the miraculous catch of fish was not to jump up and down to celebrate his good fortune. No, Peter fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Get away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

"Do not be afraid," Jesus replied, "for now on you will catch people."

Do not be afraid. The most repeated command in the entire Bible.

In Luke, just a few chapters back, when an angel appeared to Zechariah to announce that his prayers had been answered for a child, Zechariah was told, “Do not be afraid.” And when an angel appeared to Mary to announce that she would give birth to Jesus, the Messiah, she was first told, “Do not be afraid.” And when an angel appeared to the shepherds in the fields to announce that Christ had been born, they were first told, “Do not be afraid.”

Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. In the Bible, when people find themselves in the presence of the divine, they tremble in fear, recognizing their unworthiness. But God and God’s messengers keep coming, repeating the phrase “Do not be afraid,” even as they call people to futures that they thought impossible.

Do not be afraid, Peter, from now on you will catch people. Jesus didn't deny Peter's sinfulness, but he did deny that Peter needed to measure up to some standard in order to be close to Jesus. To Jesus, the only worthy offering is ourselves – not who we think we should be but who we are. Are we up to it? Are you up to it? Those aren't questions that Jesus asks when he calls people to be his disciples.

You know, there is freedom in that. Before God, you do not need to convince anyone of anything. Jesus’ presence, his mercy, his call to discipleship, is not given because you are talented, gifted, wise, good-looking, successful. No, they are given simply because you are within shouting distance of Jesus.

The thing is, we can recognize the mercy in Jesus’ invitation to Peter while, at the same time, not granting that mercy to others. As a church, we can be, I can be, so judgmental of people who have different struggles than our own. There are so many people whose gifts have been rejected by the church because they didn't measure up to some standard, either by clear, official declaration or by clear, passive-aggressive communication. Race. Gender. Sexuality. Education. Class. These are people who have desired to follow Jesus. These are people who have been gifted by the Holy Spirit to serve Christ. Jesus had no preconditions for Peter, but we place preconditions on others.

Jesus minced no words when he saw that happening. “You experts in the law, woe to you,” Jesus said,” because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.”

Our judgment on who is worthy to be a part of the community of disciples is not in keeping with Christ’s call upon our own lives. It prevents us from truly seeing a lot of people for who they

are. Christ's calls Peter and each one of us as sinners, teaching us that, when we follow Jesus, we will see the world through the prism of our own heartbreak, our own anguish, our own sin. But what does this mean?

Don't be afraid, Jesus said, for now on you will catch people." So Peter, James, and John pulled their boats up on shore and followed Jesus. They didn't know what the future held exactly, but they knew that, if fishing for people was anything like fishing for fish, it would require their entire lives. They knew that they had to leave some things behind, including the bounty of their miraculous catch.

A couple of summers ago, I had the opportunity to take a woodturning class that was run by my dad and uncle. My dad had been an industrial arts teacher, and he has spent years cultivating his hobby of woodturning. When I talked with him, he was always excited about the school. To be honest, though, my reasons for wanting to take this class had little to do with woodturning.

I wanted to support what my dad was doing. I wanted to learn just a bit about what he was passionate about. Even though I knew that I would never approach his expertise, I wanted to be able to communicate with him about a common project, a common hobby.

I wanted the opportunity to learn a new skill, to be sure, but I wanted to be taught by dad. The older I get, the more precious I understand the time I spend with my parents. And so I wanted to spend some time with him, being taught by him. I took this class with three other friends, and we traveled from Virginia to Ohio together. We still talk about this time as an important one in our friendship.

The first hour of the class was spent in front of a classroom learning new terminology, including the names of tools. But that was just the introduction. To learn to turn what looks like a piece of firewood into a work of art, it isn't sufficient that you just be told how to do it. You must put on the mask and the goggles and spend time in front of the lathe actually working. It's not simply enough to be taught about safety, you must learn to practice it. You must know what it feels like when you apply too much pressure so the gouge catch. But you must not be too timid so that you aren't applying enough pressure to do much of anything. You must actually feel the joy of woodchips showering up your sleeve when you have yourself and your tools positioned just right.

And you must be willing to submit to the training of a master craftsmen. There were times when I learned from imitation, and there were times I learned by him literally taking my arm and guiding it.

Our first project was a simple bowl made out of easy to turn, soft wood. Unbelievably, under the observation and instruction of my dad and uncle, it was turning out really good. I was so proud of my first bowl. The only part left was the final step, to make the lip at the bottom of the bowl. Since my dad and uncle were helping other students, I decided to go ahead and do it myself even though I wasn't completely sure what I was doing.

Needless to say, I cut too far, cutting right through the bottom of the bowl, ruining it. You know what my first thought was? I was afraid that I let down my dad, and I was surprised by my emotions. I had to fight back tears. And the truth is, my dad was disappointed, but he was not disappointed in me; he was disappointed for me. He was sorry that I went ahead because it wouldn't have happened if I was working under his care. In order to redeem my bowl, dad made a plug for the large hole and glued it. He told me to sand off the glue streaks, and to stain it. But I kept the bowl the way it was. I preferred it that way.

My second bowl looks a lot better, but that first one means more to me. It reminds me of my need to stay under the supervision of the master craftsmen. It reminds me of my inability to do this on my own. It reminds me of my dad's deep desire for my success, to the extent that he plugged the hole that I caused.

Where to begin? How to begin? Am I up to it? That first bowl reminds me of what I often forget. If I want to grow, I must accept discipline. If I want to be heard, I must be willing to listen. If I want community, I have to be willing to be connected to others. If I want to learn about God and grow into God, I have to be willing to spend time with God. And finally, if I want mercy, I simply have to show where I have messed up and ask for help.

To become a disciple is not a matter of worthiness. It's not a matter of a new or changed self-understanding. No, discipleship is the acceptance of a different kind of life in a different community with a different set of practices. Discipleship is learned, not inherited. No one becomes a disciple by accident. It means choosing to accept the call of Jesus for a life under his guidance and care. It involves discipline, obedience, and mercy, for sure. But it also means recognizing where we have fallen short and accepting the grace that fills our holes to make us whole. "For we have this treasure in jars of clay -- in hole-in-the-bottom bowls -- to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

Jesus came to the lakeshore, and he comes to us. And he comes to you. In the midst of your actual life, the midst of your busyness, your doubts, your worries, your fears, your sin.

Like Peter, you may think that you are not worthy. But do not be afraid. You are exactly the person that God desires. And the only worthy response to Jesus' invitation? It's yourself.

Jesus says, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."* (Matthew 11:28-30)