

Following Through

Luke 5:1-11 John 21:1-11

February 7, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

Luke 5:1-11 *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.*

John 21:1-11 *After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. 2 Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. 3 Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. 4 Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5 Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." 6 He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. 7 That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. 8 But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far*

from the land, only about a hundred yards off. 9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. 10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." 11 So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.

Jesus was on a recruitment mission. He needed disciples. For some reason he started with fishermen.

Think how different modern recruitment techniques are. A friend told me that a headhunter offering a lucrative opportunity in another company had contacted her. It was an offer she couldn't refuse, she said. The banks and corporations which paid bonuses ten times the size of most of our mortgages defended their stewardship of investors' funds and government bailouts by saying if they didn't pay these millions, they would lose their best people. College sports recruitment is in a league all by itself. With millions at stake in sports television revenue, millions are spent enticing the hottest talent.

Well, it's wonderful thing to be wanted, but it seems no one comes cheap these days. If the Pied Piper were trying to get those kids to follow him out of town today, he'd probably have to negotiate a large cash advance first!

Recruitment in the non-profit world is another matter entirely, the inducements to give of our time, talent, and energy lying along the lines of self-satisfaction and a sense of right. Deeply imbedded in our American fiber is the tradition of volunteering, and good for us, I say! But in the church, it is not volunteers we look for, but disciples, and anyone who has ever served as a committee chairperson looking for committee members knows that disciples aren't lining up ten deep at the door begging for a part to play. Discretionary time -- time not spent on one's job -- has shrunk enormously. Competition for a portion of that discretionary time has increased enormously. All of us feel pressed and stressed, and "if-only-I-had-more-time" is a common lament. We want to give of ourselves, but increasingly our prayer is, "Oh, Lord, use me, but in an advisory capacity!"

So, why did those fishermen drop their nets when Jesus said, "Follow me?" Two simple words, and without so much as one more knot in their nets or a flick of fish scales off their hands, they follow. Does that make sense to you? Think for a moment. You're an experienced commercial

fishermen. It's been your life and your livelihood, and you weren't born yesterday. You've served two terms as president of the Lake Gennesaret Fishermen's Union, and you know the lake like you know the fish smell on your hands. So, a perfect stranger shows up, gives you some audacious advice on a passing school of fish, and you drop everything and go with him? No, there's something fishy going on here.

So, let me tell you first what I think is not true about this story. I think this passage in Luke is no more about fishing than *The DaVinci Code* is about theology. Nor do I think it is a historic account of just how Jesus recruited disciples on a lakeshore two thousand years ago. It is a multi-layered story that only in the shallows is about calling disciples and in the depths about what it means to *be* a disciple.

Jesus says, "Follow me!" But, *follow*, an innocent word in our ears, is a term of scorn in the Old Testament. There it implies abandonment of the faith; our modern equivalent might be "brain-washed", in the sense that someone *followed* some lunatic sect leader. For Luke to have Jesus say, "*Follow* me!" was to startle believers into understanding what a complete departure this was from the old religious life.

Keep in mind that Luke wrote his gospel forty to fifty years after the crucifixion of Jesus, which means his audience comprised second and third generation Christians. The church was growing, but it was now far less Jewish and more Gentile in character. The early leaders of the church had aged and died. There were enormous difficulties in communication between the widely scattered congregations. There was an inevitable tendency for new leaders to take innovative directions with their teachings.

A variety of interpretations and understandings of Jesus' message was preached. So, what tradition was reliable? Whose interpretation was to survive? Luke's story insists that Peter is the trustworthy interpreter. It is (Simon) Peter's boat Jesus gets into. It is Peter whom Jesus instructs in fishing. It is Peter whom the other partners rush to help when the load of fish is so overwhelming. In this story Luke instructed the church of his day to stay faithful to the tradition of Peter.

Another layer of meaning the story addresses has to do with the turbulence afflicting the church during Luke's lifetime. Did one have to first be a Jew before becoming a Christian? Were the increasing numbers of Gentiles really acceptable? Social norms kept women silent and meek; is it proper they could preach and teach? What were the signs of faithfulness?

A host of questions arose that the very young, very disorganized, very diverse church had to struggle over.

Meanwhile, the movement had become noticeable and was attracting the attention of Rome. Sporadic persecutions and harassments occurred. Some in the church advised watering down and hunkering down and becoming nearly invisible in society, to remain quiet and small and insignificant.

Luke's fish story rejects this policy. Jesus tells the disciples to put out into the deep and work. When Peter complains they have been working all night without results, Jesus in effect tells them they've had no success because they've played it safe, sticking close to the shore. They go deeper and are overwhelmed by the catch. So another set of problems arises: the nets begin to break, the boat begins to sink. But others rush to their aid showing success in unity among church leaders, aiding and supporting one another. When the fishermen come ashore together, they leave everything and follow Jesus. What they left behind was their differences, and their excuses.

So, speaking of being left, where does this leave us? Though there are aspects of this story that seem ancient and remote, see if it isn't a modern parable after all. We, too, are part of a world-wide church that is divided -- name your label -- along evangelical, Pentecostal, fundamentalist, emergent, progressive, liberal, Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic lines, not to mention racial and economic lines.

We too allow social and political divisions to overwhelm us. We fail to speak about them too much for fear of offending. We may be misunderstood, our friends may think us too religious, we may step on a political or religious hornet's nest. We find it more comfortable to be politically correct than lovingly correct.

Mostly, though, we are hesitant to change. We are natively more invested in conserving the church we know than the church we are called to be. But we are Jesus' fishermen hearing his call to push out into the deep, to stretch ourselves, to take risks, to speak the truth, and win hearts even if, in that deep, deep water, the risk of sinking is very real and we fear that despite our training we really don't know how to swim.

What would it mean for First Presbyterian Church to push out into the deep? What would it mean for us to strive to become more diverse, to risk the beauty and security of our building, to stretch our dollars, to explore a new way of understanding God's movement in the world? What would it mean for this church, the physical neighbor of the capitol building, to tell our government leaders how tired we are of immobility in matters of equity and justice and compassion? What initiative of ministry, mission, and advocacy

might we mount which honor our historic commitments to education, to social justice, and to addressing places of power with the claims of Christ?

The voice is insistent: go into the deep. It's only in taking the risk of faith that our fears and hesitations can be conquered, and only in the deep that faith exceed whatever we have done sticking close to the cozy shore of small catches. That's the problem with Jesus; he keeps rocking the boat.