

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Go Down or Let Go

Luke 5.1-11

February 6, 2022

This morning's Gospel reading from Luke 5, the story of Jesus calling his disciples and particularly, Simon or Simon Peter or Peter--he gets called by all three names—from his fishing boat, I was thinking about this story I saw a report from a basketball game, which just seemed familiar to this story.

It's a story about Steph Curry, who is the greatest shooter in basketball history, but was in a little bit of a slump recently. In the first half of a game against Houston, he'd only made ten points and only one three-pointer, quite uncharacteristic. It was then that the player guarding him, Kevin Porter, took credit for what was happening to Curry, stared him down and started talking to him. Trash talk. Curry didn't say a word. The trash talk got louder. And then Steph went Steph. In the 4th quarter, he went 7-10, including 4-7 from the 3-point line. The 2nd most he's ever scored in a 4th quarter and led his team to an easy win. The other player, the trash talker, Kevin Porter, do you know what he did after the game, after all the trash talk? No, not even after the game, still with 30 seconds on the clock, he went right up to Curry on the court, and he said, "I went up to him and I asked him for some pointers," Porter said, according to the Houston Chronicle. "Being MVP, first unanimous, that's someone I can learn from. He's been doing this for so long. People get comfortable with what he's capable of doing. It's not really a surprise. But seeing him play like this is definitely something to learn from." I think it's the basketball version of "Forgive me. I didn't know what I was doing." Or "O great One, I'm a sinful man." That's, in a way, what today's Gospel story is all about—or at least part, finding yourself in the presence of greatness, which changes how you see the world and can lead you to a new way of life.

Jesus was standing by the water; a crowd was pressing in on him to hear him teach and preach the word of God. They wanted to hear everything he had to say; they were pressing in closer and closer. This wasn't an unusual experience for him. Crowds were gathering to hear him and see him and touch him and be touched by him.

They hung on his words saying, 'who is this, he teaches with authority, not like the scribes and pharisees.' There was something about him, not just the words he said, but the way he said them. Something magnetic; something cosmic; something divine. Long before people understood who he was, they felt something instinctively about him, something awakening in themselves, just being in his presence—wisdom, holiness, love. This seems to be true for Simon as well, a fishman on a nearby boat hearing everything Jesus was saying.

Not just the way he spoke, but his words, too, what he taught. We're not told what he was teaching here on the shoreline. All Luke says is, "the crowd was pressing to hear the word of God". Nearby were some fishermen still in their boats cleaning up after a long night. Pressed in

by the crowds, Jesus got into one of the boats and asked its owner, Simon, to push just a little way off shore., where Jesus sat down and continued teaching to the crowds on the shore.

If Simon wasn't really paying attention before, he was now; what else could he do in the boat with Jesus. He is Simon, also called Peter, washer of nets and rower of boats, not much of a swimmer, a man of kindness to a preacher, and now a captive audience. He can't get away. What's he going to do? Walk away on water?

We don't know what Jesus was saying here in this exact moment, but we know what he taught about God and about God's kingdom about rich and poor, about right and wrong, about despair and hope, and about God. Jesus taught about God like he knew God intimately and personally. God is like a Father who gives you everything and then waits for you to come back to him. God is like a king who gives the kingdom to those who are not afraid to let go and trust.

He said things like: blessed are the poor, blessed are you who are hungry now, blessed are you who weep now . . . God sees your suffering and is with you.

But woe to the rich, woe to you who are full, woe to you who cackle with glee at your good fortune. . . God sees how you treat others in your selfishness and greed and is not with you. If Simon wasn't paying attention before he would be now. He is Simon Peter, coming home empty-netted, and empty-hearted... again. There have been too many nights like this since the Romans started dumping slag from their villa construction projects right into the lake water. It didn't take a scientist to see the damage to the lake ecosystem. It didn't used to be this way. He is Simon Peter, son and grandson of proud fishermen, but a failure in his darkest moments and in his mother-in-law's eyes. He is another worn out, worn down, no good, uneducated Jew in a world of Romans, a nothing man in a world of Pharisees. He is Simon Peter, slumped over, washing nets, a net man which is all a fisherman is with no fish, besides hungry.

There had been no catch that night. Simon and his partners dragged themselves to shore with empty nets and empty bellies, and the shame of those who cannot provide for their families. So, if Jesus is saying blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, Simon was paying a little bit of attention. He was poor; he was hungry too many nights; he wept over his station in life and the state of the world when he had the energy to look beyond himself. Most preachers didn't talk like this.

Simon thinks: There's something different about this teacher. He teaches as one with authority; he teaches as one with compassion; he teaches like he sees the world in a whole new way, or is making the world in a whole new way. I'd follow this man, or someone like me in that crowd should follow this man. I'd do it if . . . if I had enough fish, enough time; if I was more educated; if I was a religious person. By God, I'd follow him.

But then Simon also thinks: Look at those crowds, right here by the docks. I wish I had a boat of fish to sell them today. I'd make a fortune. Simon startles back to attention when Jesus just then says, like he knew his thoughts, "Simon, let's go fish. Put out to the deep water and let down your nets. Let's go have a catch."

With a renewed energy or willing submission or bored optimism, Simon agrees, saying, “We did that all night and caught nothing, but if you say so, we’ll do it.” I’ve never met a fisherman who wasn’t convinced that on the next cast he’d catch a big fish. There’s always time for just one more. Optimism--or desperation--drives us past the point of reason; we keep trying, even past the point when we should probably give up. We try one more time. How did Fitzgerald describe it? “Beating our boats against the current, borne ceaseless back into the past.” But this wasn’t a journey into a dark past; oh no, this was about to open up a whole new future.

Simon seems more resigned than determined but he does as Jesus instructs. They row out to deep water, lower the nets and bam, they fill. They fill like never before. Strong forearms tense; strong, calloused hands grip as a fish-full net pulls down like an anchor dropping into the deep. Another boat of fishermen rows up to help. Both boats together can hardly stay above the water line at the unseen weight that strains the nets and the backs. The nets are breaking, the boats are taking on water. It was as if every fish in the whole lake was in those nets. They may have been.

Whooping, grunting, water-lapping, ropes-snapping, Simon snapping off instructions like one born to be a leader. He is Simon Peter, the greatest fisher person that ever was. Born to ride the waves, made to conquer the deep. He is master and commander of the seas, and he is going to get this haul to shore if it’s the last thing he does. He is Simon Peter, already cashing in this haul, already doing the math. He’s finally hit the big one, the catch of a lifetime. He can already see the register spin; he can hear the coins hitting the pile. He can already feel the backslaps and songs in his honor at the pub.

He is Simon Peter, who definitely doesn’t want to hear a sermon about blessed are the poor now. Are you kidding? Blessed is Poseidon, blessed are the rich, blessed will I be if I can just get this ship to shore without it sinking. But the preacher’s still standing there, which is awkward. Not helping at all, just standing over there watching all of this. Watching all of them work, strain, and watching them begin to worry if these boats are going to make it after all. He’s just watching. “Oh, now you’ve got nothing to say, Jesus? Oh, all that preaching, and now you’re quiet?” Simon groans, leveraging his oak like thigh against the sidewall. “Oh, I suppose you think this is funny, huh?” he sneers, sweat beginning to drop from his head and down his beard and to the hem of his robes. “I don’t know how you got lucky with let’s go fish one more time, but I could use a little help again if you’ve got it in you. I suppose you think this is a non-profit operation, give this to the poor, give all this away, is that your game? I heard your sermon. I heard your bleeding heart, liberal, socialist agenda.” Jesus laughs at that because it’s a funny line, and that’s all it is.

“I heard everything you had to say. And you know [groan] it’s nice [groan], but listinen, I got mine now. I’m a made man now.” Simon’s foot begins to slip on the deck wet with sloshing water, but his hands still hold the ropes. One foot slips; the other slips, and then he lands on his knees right near Jesus. He looks up at him, “I’ve got mine now as soon as I can get this boat to shore. Go away from me, **I am** a sinful man.” He laughs at his own joke.

Calling himself a sinful man has been kind of a running gag to him, a post-ironic appropriation of religious cultural language. I'm a "sinful" man--a way to deflect the judgments and pass by the offering plates of the stone-eyed, cold-hearted Pharisees always looking down on men who work with their hands and lead with their hearts, but always asking them for another coin. But this is not a Pharisee, it's not a "Jesus". It's Jesus-- in the flesh. "Go away from me." Jesus doesn't flinch. He doesn't move. I mean, he's on a boat, where's he going to go? Walk on water?

The boat he is on is sinking. On his knees, looking into the eyes of Jesus, suddenly, Simon realizes something. It washes over him: he's in a net, too. He's caught like a big fish in a small net. These fish in the water aren't coming up from the deep today. This boat's not going to make it to shore. The greatest catch of his life has become the greatest choice in his life. Hold on and go down with them or let go and live. And looking up at Jesus, Simon realizes what Jesus already knows. Jesus has put his own life in Simon Peter's strong hands and uncertain decision. With Simon he, too, will either die or he will live. He looks back at Jesus with no irony, no smirk, no defenses. There's mystery afoot here. This is life-changing but not in the way he thought it would be.

Simon Peter's forearms slightly, just slightly, loosen their tautness. He knows on any other day—maybe every other day—he might just choose to go down fighting with the nets and the boats just on stubbornness alone. I'm a sinful man. I'm actually, truly a sinful person. Now I'm caught in my own net. None of this made total sense to him yet, but he somehow knew it would.

Simon was a working man, not a religious Bible Scholar, so he probably didn't realize how he had already just now followed in the footsteps of great men and women who had come before him in the presence of God who comes and calls. Prophet Isaiah: "Woe is me, I am a man of unclean lips." Patriarch and Matriarch Abraham and Sarah's laugh when told they will be the grandparents of a great nation. Moses s-s-s-stammering a protest when God calls him to go back to Egypt to liberate the captives. Mother Mary's: "How can this be?" And on and on.

In a way metaphorical of all who know, with Jesus they face the choice of a lifetime, at the moment of surrender they were on a sinking boat over deep water. Deep water is Bible-talk for the abyss of chaos, fear, and death. Jesus is there, too, even there; just there, in the deep waters of all our lives in the moment when we only have the choice: grip tightly to our own identity or let go and trust.

"Do not be afraid." He says to Peter. He says to all. "You're going to be ok. Let it go. Let go of what you're clinging to, the person you've made yourself to be, the life you're trying to forge from your own strength. Let it loose, let it drop, let it be. I have great plans for you."

They rowed their boats to shore, but not with the fish, who swam free from loose nets. Liberated fish swam free in the water. Strangely liberated men stepped lightly on the shore; they brought their boats to shore and left them there. They left them there, Simon and the others. They left *everything* that day, everything but everything that mattered.

Maybe one last look over the shoulder at the life that could've been if it hadn't killed them. One last look, then they left everything and followed him. Him . . . Jesus, into whose hands they now trust their lives as he trusted his life in theirs. It was their first lesson. The one who saves his life will lose it; he who loses his life will save it.

He is Peter, a fisher for Jesus of people, lowering nets of God's grace into depths of human darkness. Lifting people from darkness to light, from death to life. He is Peter, disciple, apostle, miracle worker, martyr. Born to lead, learned to serve. Not a master and commander of the seas, but a servant and follower of the Lord. He is Saint Peter, the symbol of the whole church, the whole church being called to follow and serve and to trust God in all the deep waters.

They left everything to follow Jesus.

And that's the story of a man who let loose his grip of everything he held on to and became a saint.

That's the story of all of us who hear Jesus' words, "Let go. Do not be afraid. Follow me."

Thanks be to God.

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