

## **Leaving Behind Empty Nets**

### **Luke 5:1-11**

A few years ago there was a news story out of (where else?) California about a man who was apparently competing for the title of most incompetent bank robber in history. He went into a Bank of America branch in San Francisco and wrote out a stick up note on the back of a deposit slip. He got in line to present his note to the teller, but he was new at this, and he was nervous. While he was in line he started thinking that maybe somebody saw him writing the stick up note. Maybe they were calling the police right now. And the line was long, and so was the wait, so he got out of line and went across the street to the Wells-Fargo bank. He finally got up to a cashier and presented her with the note. The cashier was either very brave or nearly as dumb as our robber, because according to police, she said to him, "I'm sorry, but we can't take notes written on Bank of America deposit slips. You will have to write out another note on one of our slips." At this point our hero went back across the street to the Bank of America and got in line again there--which is exactly where the police found him a few minutes later. Maybe this would-be hold-up man was in the wrong business. Maybe we all have days when we wonder if we're in the wrong business. Maybe Simon the fisherman had a feeling that he was in the wrong business as well. After all, it had been a pretty bad night!

This story has a wonderful flow. Simon and his colleagues are drying their nets after a frustrating night of fruitless fishing. Jesus appears and has Simon row him out a bit so he can address the pressing crowd with greater clarity. The water and topography along that shore serve as a natural conduit for sound. At the end of his talk, Jesus tells Simon to let down his net in the deep waters for a catch. As if it hadn't been bad enough to fish all night for nothing, now here comes this rabbi with a nifty new idea. What's he know about fishing? For reasons even he probably doesn't fully understand, Simon does as he's told. The result is such a catch of fish that his boat and his partners' boat both begin to sink!

What would your reaction have been? You just won the lottery! The worst night of the week just became the best! You could probably take a day or two off. So what is Simon's reaction to the catch? Not joy but fear! "Depart from me, O Lord," Simon cries out, "for I am a sinful man." Jesus tells him, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will be fishing for people." (Luke 5: 10) And, just like that, Simon and the others leave everything to follow Jesus!

Sounds fishy to me. Too quick a decision. Simon did none of the normal work we associate with making a career change. He didn't consult his accountant or his priest. He never asked about salary or vacation. He didn't inquire about profit-sharing or pensions.

He didn't pray! He didn't even ask his wife. He didn't say, "Hey, wait a minute, where are we going?" He just left everything and followed Jesus. It leaves me wondering if something else was going on here, something in Simon's life . . . and there just might have been! To get a clue as to what was going on in Simon's life, I went back to the fourth chapter of Luke where Jesus enters the small Galilean village of Capernaum. There Jesus stays at the home of Simon's mother-in-law. Since this house would later become a sort of headquarters for Jesus and his disciples, many scholars think it's quite possible that Simon and his wife lived there with her mother. Now, there's nothing inherently wrong with you and your wife living with her mother, but, in the social world of bible times, living in your mother-in-law's house doesn't exactly label you a rousing success! And we get an even bigger hint when we realize that Simon didn't own his own business. Instead he worked as a hired man with the sons of Zebedee, James and John, under their daddy's watchful eye! Then too, Luke's Gospel says things were not going well in the mother-in-law's house. On the day that Jesus stays with them his mother-in-law is seriously ill with a wracking fever. Jesus rebukes the fever and heals her.

Now, as we move into the heart of our lesson for the day, we see Simon's bad week becoming worse! He was living with his mother-in-law, working for "The Sons of Zebedee Fishing Company," and now he strikes out by not catching a single fish in a

night of intense labor. To Simon, and to all these people, fishing was not a way to pass a pleasant summer evening; it was his livelihood. No fish, no money. No money, no food for your family. In Galilee, fish was the local industry. Simon had not caught any fish and Luke uses the Greek word "kopos," to describe his feeling. Kopos literally means "beaten down with toil and weariness." It was not for lack of effort that Simon had failed. He'd fished all night long, but all he had to show for his efforts were empty nets which needed drying.

Where am I going with all this? Just here: IT IS IN THE MIDST OF FAILURE THAT SIMON MEETS JESUS. He lives with a sick mother-in-law. He works for somebody else. He just had a terrible night on the job. It's not too much to think that the big word rattling around in Simon's head this morning was the "F" word. Failure.

Failure is not a dirty word--and yet we sometimes act as if it is. Contrary to everything the world outside those doors will tell you, failure is not the end of the world. We all fail. Every person, great and not-so-great, fails at some time in his or her life. George Washington lost nearly every major battle of the Revolutionary War, except the last one, the one he had to win. Abraham Lincoln lost more elections than he won. In 1922, Harry Truman was 38, out of work, and in debt. Twenty-three years later he was the leader of the free world. Albert Einstein flunked his freshman math class. Picasso in his early

years used to burn some of his drawings to keep warm. And Thomas Edison was sent home from school once by a teacher who said he was too stupid to learn. Jack Dempsey the great heavyweight champion once defined a champion as someone who gets up when he can't. You can let failure defeat you, or you can let it shape you.

Have you known failure? Ever felt you were a failure? Had nights when the fish just don't bite? I have. I have felt I was a failure. I have been like Simon toiling all night, giving my best, yet at the end of the day, feeling like my nets were empty! We all fail at times, my friends. That's why we need to hear the rest of this morning's reading.

JESUS DOESN'T LET SIMON'S APPARENT FAILURE IN FISHING PREVENT HIM FROM BECOMING THE LEADER OF JESUS' CHOSEN TWELVE. He may have failed in one day of fishing. That did not mean he was a failure in life. Never forget: there is an enormous difference between saying, "I have failed," and "I am a failure." After Jesus has finished speaking he tells Simon to cast his net and to expect a catch. Now remember, Simon's just spent an entire night of frustration. He feels bad enough. The last thing he wanted was advice from this traveling rabbi. What did rabbis know about fishing? But Simon has more character than most people. And maybe that's what Jesus sees in him. He says to Jesus: "At your word I will let down the nets." He might fail again. He might be embarrassed again. But Simon had the courage to try again.

Good things did happen. Simon wanted fish; he got fish! He got so many fish that he nearly sank the entire fleet of Zebedee and Sons Fish Company! This was the most successful day in Simon's life, so what does he do? Why, the logical and prudent thing, of course. He walked away from it all! That's what is staggering about this story. WHEN JESUS TOLD HIM HE HAD OTHER PLANS FOR HIM, SIMON WALKED AWAY FROM THE ONLY LIVELIHOOD THAT HE KNEW. Maybe he'd come to that critical point in every thinking person's life where he realizes that everything material he ever wanted wasn't enough! Simon's hunger is not for lake trout. His hunger is for God! And thus he collapses at Jesus' feet and confesses, "I'm a sinner." Wait a minute! Did Jesus come at Simon with threats and condemnation? Did he frighten him with hellfire and damnation if he didn't clean up his act? Why does this big sturdy man suddenly collapse in a heap? To understand why can bring the meaning of this story home to us.

God confronts us not with threats but with goodness and with power. He comes at us not with fire and smoke, but with grace. If we're listening to God, then like Simon, we are driven to an honest appraisal of who we are. To encounter the holy and living God in any honest, reflective way is to realize how far short we fall. What's the most important function of the ten Commandments, I would always ask my confirmation classes? What do they do for us, most of all? "Tell us how to live and obey God's law," they all say.

Wrong, I say. They are a mirror. First and foremost they are one way I can measure myself before God. Do I obey? Sometimes, but not often. When I look into the commandments, I see myself as God sees me. And then I'm on the ground with Simon, wishing God would just leave me alone, since I know that my life is anything but an extended story of obeying God's law. But then with Simon, I hear Jesus say, "don't be afraid." I know who you are. I know what you are. And I see beyond the failures and the inadequacies. I see what you can be. I see what you will be. Just get up, Simon. Follow me. You failed, but you're not a failure. Get up, Steve, get up Cynthia, get up Fred and Sue and Charlie and Jim and the rest of you. Follow me. When I get through with you, you'll be filled with a passion for fishing you never dreamed. And it has nothing to do with mackerel and trout. I'm going to make you into people who draw others to know God.

Simon walked away from the biggest day in his life. Jesus offered Simon, as he offers us, a better direction in life. Simon learned he was a child of God. He learned that he had nothing to fear from God. In fact, he learned that by fearing God, he was really hiding from him. And now here he was, this God, working through an unusual man, one named Jesus, coming to find him. Simon couldn't believe it. He knew who he was. He knew the feelings of failure, of inadequacy, of guilt. In short, all of the things that make us hide from God, that lead us to believe the Gospel is good news for somebody else, but not for

us. We have to go on pretending. And yet what is Jesus's invitation to Simon, to us, but an invitation to stop hiding, to get up, and to come home?

In James Goldman's novel, *The Lion in Winter*, there is a scene where three sons of the English King Henry wrestle for the right to succeed their father. John tells his mother Queen Eleanor that his brother Richard has a knife. And Eleanor, one of the great ladies of history, says this: "Of course your brother has a knife. We all have knives--we are barbarians--we are the origins of war--we breed war. For the love of God," she continues, "can't we love one another--just a little? That's how peace begins. We have such possibilities, my children. We could change the world."

After fishing all night and failing, Jesus came to Simon and changed him forever. Jesus' order to him, "Put your net down for a catch" is both challenge and promise, to Simon and to us. The challenge: Never be afraid to try again. And the promise: the long night passes into day and we live to put our nets down for another day and expect the providence of God. We are loved. And if we will but come to our senses and get up and follow, and leave behind all the empty nets we have spent years casting into the sea, chasing things that don't satisfy, slaving for things that don't matter, then as Eleanor said, "we have such possibilities. We could change the world." Or at least, our world.