JESUS CALLS THE FIRST DISCIPLES

Luke 5:1–11

Key Verse: 5:10b

“And Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.’”

Have you ever followed anyone? Maybe it was a teacher, a coach or an older sibling. As little children we all followed parents or guardians, simply by because we were so helpless and vulnerable. As adults, we follow those who have some knowledge, skills or quality that we want to learn. On social media we “follow” people we consider friends, to stay in touch with what they’re doing, or famous people who interest us. But in the original sense, to “follow” someone involves respecting that person and being aware of our own need to grow. Today’s passage tells us how Jesus’ disciple Simon Peter began to follow him. It wasn’t just his own personal story. Of course we no longer have access to the physical, human Jesus who lived and worked on this earth some 2,000 years ago. But Luke records this encounter to show us what anyone at any time or place can learn about following Jesus. How does that even *happen*? What does it really *mean*? And why should we *do* so? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

Today’s passage is unique to Luke’s Gospel, and it shows Luke’s skill at re-telling a story in a most beautiful way. It begins, “On one occasion…” Look at verses 1–3. We notice several things here. First is the crowd. They’re “pressing in” on Jesus. Through his amazing teaching and healing ministry Jesus has quickly become what people today would consider a kind of “rock star.”

Luke adds in verse 1 that they really want “to hear the word of God.” Luke uses this expression “the word of God” more than any other Gospel writer, both in Luke’s Gospel and especially in Acts (Lk3:2; 5:1; 8:11,21; 11:28; Ac4:31; 6:2,7; 8:14; 11:1; 12:24; 13:5,7,46; 17:13; 18:11). This expression “the word of God” stresses not only where the words came from (from God himself) but also their authority. “The word of God” isn’t necessarily any particular Bible verse or passage; it simply summarizes the whole message of Jesus, as well as the message of his apostles. Simply, “the word of God” is the message of God’s salvation in Jesus (cf. 4:18–19).

People are eager to hear what Jesus is teaching, but unless they are physically close to him, it’s not easy. Jesus perceives this situation is not ideal, and possibly dangerous. Since he’s standing at “the lake of Gennesaret” (also known as the Sea of Galilee), he sees an opportunity. It’s morning, the fishermen there have been out on the lake all night and are now washing their nets, and so there’s some empty boats. It would be great to get into one of those boats and get a little distance from the crowd. Then people would stop pushing, and the open space could allow his voice to carry and be heard by everybody. It would be like nature’s microphone system.

Finally, we notice in verse 3 that Jesus asks Simon to help him. We’ve seen that Jesus already has been to Simon’s house and healed his mother-in-law, as well as many other people late into the night (4:38–40). Now he sees Simon again, at his working place one morning. Because they’ve already been acquainted, it’s natural for Jesus to ask him a favor. And Simon is quick to help. Thus we find Jesus and Simon together in this boat, and this time Simon isn’t witnessing healings; he can actually hear what Jesus is teaching. How long this went on isn’t mentioned, but it was surely more than just a few minutes. Probably Simon is still washing his nets while he’s quietly helping Jesus with his teaching ministry. It shows us the first step in being a follower of Jesus: being willing to help him, and, learning to listen to his words. It also shows the first step in inviting someone to follow Jesus: reaching out to ask their help.

Suddenly the story shifts: the crowd dissolves and the focus turns to Jesus and Simon. Read verse 4. This is way more challenging than just asking Simon to put out a little from the land to use his boat. Jesus is asking him to go out fishing again, when Simon has just finished washing his nets! He says, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” To a fisherman this is just not the best time. On this deep water lake they would go out fishing during the night, when fish would come closer to the surface to find food. When daylight came, with boats generally becoming more active, the fish would all disappear.

The expression “the deep” has some symbolism. In a sense Jesus is inviting Simon to become more than just a passive observer or listener. He’s inviting him to take the plunge into the much deeper world of following and learning from Jesus. He’s also inviting Simon to experience something he never could with his own effort or ability: what Jesus can do in our lives if we would just trust and obey him. It shows us all the quintessential element in becoming a true follower of Jesus—learning to trust and obey him in our daily lives.

Simon’s response is also really important. Read verse 5. First we see his frustration at being asked to do this. Not only is this a bad time. After working all night, he’s tired. And after catching nothing, frankly he’s discouraged. He just doesn’t want to try again. We all can relate to Simon in some way. His final response, however, is stunning: “But at your word I will let down the nets.”

What is this telling us? It’s showing us that Simon has tremendous respect not only for the *word* of Jesus, but also, for *Jesus himself*. Listening to Jesus teach out on the lake that morning has done something in Simon’s heart. He’s quietly there, doing his own work, but he’s really listening. And he’s been deeply moved by the words of Jesus. This man who could heal all kinds of diseases and teach with such authority is worth listening to! Simon has learned to put the word of Jesus ahead of his own ideas, ahead of his own calculations, even ahead of his own feelings. Such a powerful phrase: “But *at* *your word*…”

Read verses 6,7. Suddenly nets ripping and two boats sinking? It’s more than coincidence; it’s a straight-up miracle. To these fishermen it’s astonishing (9). It’s unforgettable. And it’s speaking to us. When all seems impossible, when we want to give up, if we would just do what Jesus says, we would experience how he can do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think (Eph3:20).

Again Simon’s response is noteworthy. Read verse 8. Several key details are here. First of all, Luke for the first time calls him “Simon Peter.” “Peter” was the name Jesus would give Simon (6:14), and this new name meant “Rock” (Mt16:18). Something about his response to Jesus here, ironically, would make Simon Peter like a rock spiritually.

Next, when Simon Peter sees such a great catch of fish, he falls down at Jesus’ knees and says, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” It’s pretty odd. Most fishermen would have been delighted at such a moment. Simon was fishing not just to feed his family but as a business partnership with a number of other men. This catch of fish would mean a sudden and unusually large income. Most businesspeople would see in Jesus a great opportunity to make use of. But Simon tells him to “depart from me.” He’s saying, “I’m too unworthy of you!” His eyes have opened to see the holiness of God in Jesus. In light of that holiness, he can better see how sinful he himself is. This is what real humility is all about. As we’ll see later in Luke’s Gospel, being aware of our own sinfulness is another key quality in a follower of Jesus (cf. 6:42; 17:10). The others with Simon Peter share in his astonishment, especially James and John, his closest partners (9,10a).

Let’s see what Jesus says to him. Read verse 10b. When Jesus says, “Do not be afraid,” he means not to fear God’s punishment for being sinful. It implies that God is ready to forgive all Simon Peter’s sins. What sins are we talking about? It’s unlikely that Simon Peter had lived a wildly immoral life. He was just a hardworking fisherman struggling to survive. Probably he was making an honest living. What’s so wrong with that? But his sin is that he’s been struggling only for himself and his immediate loved ones. He has no greater purpose in life. So subconsciously, he’s living for self, as all of us sinful human beings do. God created each one of us not for ourselves, not just to live just to survive, but to live for his glory and to serve him. In light of this, a self-centered life is a sinful life. It cuts us off from God and leaves us full of fear. But God was ready to forgive all Simon’s sins in Jesus. Only God’s forgiveness of sins in Jesus can take away all the fear within us. God’s forgiveness gives us the chance for a new start.

Jesus also says, “…from now on you will be catching men.” These words draw a sharp contrast with Simon’s life thus far. Before this encounter with Jesus, his life had been mainly a struggle to catch fish. In modern terms it was a struggle just to make enough money to survive in this world. After inviting him to be one of his followers, Jesus would transform him to be someone who could “catch” people. Catching fish means killing and eating them. But the Greek word here for “catching men” literally means “to capture alive,” and it implies saving people (cf. Php3:12). In himself Simon Peter could save no one. But by following Jesus, Jesus could use him as his servant, his instrument. Through this great catch of fish Jesus, in a sense, “caught” Peter, and Peter, like Jesus would go on to catch many others for the kingdom of God (e.g. Ac2:41).

Followers of Jesus all share in this greater life purpose, catching people for God’s kingdom. Like Peter, we can never do this with our own strength or ability. But if we just follow Jesus, he works in and through us. He leads us to such a meaningful and useful and beautiful life. All we have to do is, like Peter, learn to listen to his word and obey it, then trust him to do the impossible.

How do these men respond? Read verse 11. It may sound like a ho-hum, matter of fact statement. But this is an incredible response! These men leave *everything*—their boats, their nets, and all those fish they just worked so hard to haul ashore! What are they *doing*? They’re leaving their careers, their life security! Really? They’re entrusting their lives in a very real and practical way into the hands of Jesus. They’re ready to go with him anywhere. What a commitment! But they’re doing it joyfully, because he’s the one inviting them and they’ve experienced something so amazing in him.

So, in light of this passage, what does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? It all starts with his invitation. We have to sense that he’s actually calling us. Then we respond. It means to learn the utmost respect for his word, ahead of all our own ideas. It means to respond to him with simple trust and obedience. It means learning how unworthy we are before him. It means accepting his invitation to live a new life, not for ourselves, but to bring others to him and to his kingdom. It means making a radical life commitment to entrust our entire lives to his hand. So, let’s ask ourselves again today: “*Am I really following* *Jesus*?”