

Text: Luke 5: 1-11  
Title: Into Deep Waters  
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In the early 1940s Lew Smedes left a job in a Detroit steel factory, hitchhiked to Muskegon, took a Greyhound to Chicago, and enrolled as a student at Moody Bible Institute. He writes this about his tenure at Moody:

*...after I learned the rules, I endeavored to get myself in synch with Moody's lifestyle. We were there not by right but by privilege, we were told, and the only sure way to stay there was to obey the rules: no dating during the first semester, only suit coats and ties in the classroom as well as at every meal, weekly reports of how much time we spent at prayer, how many gospel tracts we had given away, and how many souls we had saved.*

*I followed the rules, but I never did master the Moody accent. I could not get myself to say "Praise the Lord" as if it were a punctuation mark. Or that "I was led of the Lord" as my reason for doing whatever it was that I happened to be doing.....*

*The reputation that most students prized was that they had a "passion for souls" and were "on fire for the Lord." I did not develop a "passion for souls" and had not caught on fire, and my failure disturbed me considerably. How could I not have a passion for souls when people walking down the street at that very moment might perish forever in hell because I failed to witness to them about Jesus? Their damnation would be on my head forever. Alone in my dormitory room at night, I would ask myself: why sit here idle when I could be out on the street witnessing to sinners who might die and go hell if I do not give them another chance to accept Christ?*

Now, that is a delightful little snapshot of a bygone era, a particular theological tradition, and a conflicted soul struggling with the call to be "fishers of men." But, it has a certain resonance with me because I also remember wondering....

If eternity hangs in the balance for my neighbor, and if I love my neighbor, then I need to do everything I can to catch my neighbor with the good news about Jesus. If I love people, and they need a relationship with Jesus in order to be saved, how can I rest until they know Jesus?

Wouldn't I,  
shouldn't I,  
couldn't I,  
do something more to hook them for Jesus?

Me, Lew Smedes, maybe you ~ guilty conflicted souls because we weren't good fishermen, or we couldn't muster up the courage to cast a line, or our souls were all smoke and no fire, or....

Or, maybe there is another way to understand this iconic and enigmatic text.

Maybe there is another faithful way to follow Jesus in fishing.

Let's add some detail to this text.

At the far northeast end of the Sea of Galilee there was a collection of small Jewish fishing villages. These coastal communities were connected by a road and Capernaum ~ Simon's hometown ~ was the central hub. Jesus would have come down out of the hard-scramble-hill-country of Nazareth through a valley that spilled right into Capernaum. Luke's gospel reads that Jesus had been healing and teaching in this region of Galilee.

So, in the cool of the morning, while fishermen were putting away their gear after a long futile night, Jesus is teaching on a crowded beach. Realizing he needs a better pulpit, he asked Simon to let him speak from his boat. The Sea of Galilee is something of a long oblong bowl. People could listen from shores that gently slope up and away. The acoustics would be better from the water....

Clearly an early compromise with technology for the sake of communication ~ beginning that long slow slide down the slippery slope that leads to screens and power point preaching.

The Sea of Galilee is fed primarily by springs on the north end ~ flowing to the Jordon River on the south. A boat set in the water would drift down the lake. So, either Simon anchored the boat, or with the skill of a professional oarsman he kept the boat in place, in front of the crowd. It seems entirely plausible, therefore, that after Jesus wrapped up his sermon he turned to Simon to tip him....

*Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.*

Again, inflection is lost in translation, and the word translated here as "Master" can just as easily be translated as "boss," "teacher," or someone over you in the military. So, maybe exhausted, irritated, sarcastic Simon ~ who tended to lead with his gut ~ said:

*Oh yeah, sure 'nough boss-man, let's just go back out in deep water...  
We were out all night and didn't catch a thing...  
We cleaned the nets and put them away...  
We're dog-dead-tired and you're a rabbi from the bone-dry-hinterlands...  
We do this every day...  
But, whatever you say, boss...*

And yet, they do go back out. Jesus had recently healed Simon's mother-in-law of a high fever and maybe he wasn't nearly as sarcastic as I've imagined.

*It's better than coming home empty handed....  
And, maybe, just maybe....  
You never know with fish...*

Our translation puts little titles over sections of scripture. This section is labeled “Jesus Calls His First Disciples.” But, there is no calling. Jesus, in this passage, doesn’t invite them to follow him to fish for people. He announces. He proclaims. He says to them:

*Don’t be afraid, from now on you will catch (alive) people.*

And, they leave everything on the beach and follow him. That is the way it is told. However, it seems unlikely that they left boatloads of freshly caught fish to rot in the midday sun, but you get the point....

What they follow Jesus into is a rhythm of healings and teachings. This text is at the front end of a long section of healings. From here, Jesus heals a man with leprosy, and a paralytic, and the centurion’s sick servant. He raises the widow’s son from the dead and he heals a demon possessed man. Stuck around those stories are sermons about loving your enemies, and not judging others, and turning the other cheek. Tucked into those stories are images of an upside-down-right-side-up kingdom where the poor and those who weep are called blessed.

This is not the beginning of an evangelical crusade. Jesus doesn’t pitch a tent and enlist people to pitch a program. Jesus doesn’t talk about souls and salvation; he doesn’t preach hellfire and damnation. Instead, he catches people alive in a net of love and mercy.

He casts a net that catches the poor, the prisoner, the blind, and the oppressed.

He casts a net that catches those on the fringes, those who were vulnerable.

He casts a net that sets people free from whatever it is that enslaves them.

He casts a net that gives people the love and strength and freedom they need to be more fully alive, more fully human, more fully who they were created to be.

Jesus proclaims to these fishermen that they will join him in casting these nets. He doesn’t call the professional preachers or teachers, he doesn’t invite the well-educated or the well-heeled, he tells these common fishermen that there are bigger fish to fry and they follow him out into deeper waters.

Remember Lew Smedes? He was burdened by a particular way of understanding this mandate for mission. But, he writes that a light dawned on him after his days at Moody. In his words:

*A passion for souls? Any souls in particular? No, just souls in general.*

*I couldn’t help it; I didn’t have that passion.*

*I have, over the years, developed a passion for people, not just people in general, but persons in particular, and not just for their souls. I have an honest-to-goodness passion for certain children in Los Angeles, innocent as newborn kittens, knocked around, forgotten, abandoned by their parents, and plunked into the Los Angeles Child Welfare Department, which may not be the ultimate, but still a very real, hell. I have a passion for people of my age, without memory, without hope, stuck like living corpses in dysfunctional nursing homes. I have a passion for persons I know who need to be saved from their sins so that they can go to heaven, but for now need to be saved from AIDS and saved from hunger and hopelessness.*

Dear friends, I don't mean to dilute the call to fish for people. I don't mean to diminish the demand that you may know to call others unto Christ. But, it strikes me that this text is of one piece with the epiphany of the Kingdom. Jesus proclaims that the "year of the Lord's favor" has dawned and that liberation extends to all people. And then, Luke stacks up pictures of what that kingdom liberation looks like.

And, that is not about moving people from one side of the ledger to the other, or hanging spiritual scalps on the totem pole. It is not about fishing for souls. It is about following Jesus in casting a net of love and mercy that liberates people from whatever it is that enslaves them.

And, that net is of one piece. It is not split between evangelism and social justice. It is not works of mercy for the sake of conversion. It is not a cup of cold water in hopes of capturing a soul. It is simply following the way of Jesus in love and service ~ for Jesus would liberate all from whatever it is that enslaves: poverty, consumerism, competition, addiction, comfort, sin, cynicism, depression, etc.

So, on whatever shore you find yourself today, maybe Jesus is calling you to catch people with love and mercy. In those common moments of just getting along, doing our best, maybe Jesus is announcing that he wills for us such a purpose that we can't do it alone. It will take the nets and boats of others. Maybe, there is Jesus with a wry smile, "Let's put out in deeper waters." Maybe there is Jesus saying:

*Don't be afraid...*

*You have been remarkable gifts for remarkable purposes.*

*Your knotted and frayed life is part of the net that catches people in love and mercy....in classrooms and office buildings, in hospitals and factories, at work and unemployed, in pre-schools and post grad programs, in Peru and Roseland and Haiti and Honduras, at Elim and Trinity and Daystar, in bars and libraries and nursing homes, in selling skis and trading aluminum, through adoptions and friendship, in life and in death, at home and through Hope.*

Do you hear that call?

Do you know a passion for people, particular people, a particular person?

Don't be afraid to follow.

The nets of love and mercy overflow with bounty.

There is more than enough for everybody.

Amen.