

If You Say So

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Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
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Text: Luke 5:1-11

A number of years ago our family was vacationing on Cape Cod, and we went to the docks to see the fishermen unloading their catch for the day. There was a deck where you could stand as a member of the public and watch. It was an incredible sight to see—dogfish and skates mostly that afternoon. I came away with a great appreciation for the work these folks do...All the more so when we bought some of the day's catch and brought it home for a fish fry! Look, my experience with fishing is limited to the times I put a bit of hot dog on a hook as a kid and caught a sunfish or two in a lake. But fishing as a profession takes hard work and smarts about the weather and the sea and the habits and movements of animals that live in it. So the one thing I would never do—ever!—is to kibbitz with these guys about where to look for fish. I wouldn't know the first thing about it. I didn't grow up on the water. I don't have the experience, I don't have the knowledge, I don't have the credibility.

But Jesus goes there. Remember that Jesus is the son of a carpenter. He would have come of age in his father's workshop learning a very important trade that had nothing to do with fishing. Remember that Jesus grew up in Nazareth, a sleepy little town in the hills, some distance away from the Lake of Gennesaret, or the Sea of Galilee as it's known today, so it's likely he didn't even have regular contact, as a child and as a young man, with fishermen. In the story we heard this morning, he's begun traveling through the Galilee region as a circuit preacher, and as a healer with a growing reputation. In fact, he meets the fisherman Simon Peter because the crowds have followed him to the side of the lake. Since electric public address systems wouldn't be invented for another 1900 years, Jesus asks Peter to put out a little way from shore, so that he can address the crowd from the boat, his voice carrying more clearly over the expanse of shallow water.

Peter, we're meant to understand, has had a rough night. He and his crew worked tirelessly at their trade, and they've come up empty. They've done the best they could, with all their skills, knowledge, and experience, and it hasn't panned out. So just imagine what Peter must be thinking when this rabbi, a landlubber, the son of a carpenter, tells him to put out into deep water and lower his nets for a catch. The Aramaic language that Peter and Jesus spoke as their native tongue had a word for this kind of thing: *chutzpah!*

Not only is it presumptive for Jesus to tell Peter how to do his job. It's also a really bad plan. There is a very good reason Peter and his crew ply the waters of the lake at night. During the day, as the hot sun climbs into the sky, the fish withdraw to the deep water beyond the reach of their nets. If anything, Jesus' suggestion shows his ignorance. Peter knows that the most likely result of this plan is that they're going to catch a whole lot of empty water.

Here is where you'd expect Peter to tell Jesus where to shove his plan. But he doesn't do that. Instead, Peter gets a couple of important things right, and it makes all

the difference.

The first is this—Peter is honest with Jesus. A lot of the time, especially when we're talking with strangers, we don't put our failures, our frustrations, our anxieties, and our fears front and center. When somebody asks, "How are you?" we say, "Fine." But Peter, to his credit, actually levels with Jesus: "We had a terrible night, rabbi," he says. "As a matter of fact, we didn't catch anything." Peter, who I'd imagine has a lot of personal investment at seeing himself as a competent and capable fisherman, puts it out there. He's honest with Jesus.

And this honesty, this openness paves the way for what comes next. He trusts Jesus. And I think the words he uses are really important here. Our translation has Peter saying, "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." But the original Greek text literally says: "Upon your word, I will let down the nets." Think of that image: upon your word. One time Jesus compared everyone who hears his words and acts on them to a man who builds his house on a solid rock, so that it stands up when the rain falls and the floods come. Peter, whose name means "rock," is doing just this. He listens to Jesus. He doesn't quite understand how this is going to work. But he trusts Jesus, and he does it anyway.

Last week we heard Jesus preaching at his hometown synagogue, saying that the year of the Lord's favor had come, that the usual rules were suspended for a special season of forgiveness, release, and new beginnings. When Peter decides to put down his nets at Jesus' word, all the rules of fishing and nature and experience fall away, and he pulls up the biggest catch he's ever seen, big enough almost to break his nets and capsize his boats. Has Jesus done him a favor, or has he pulled the rug out from under him, upending everything he thought he knew? "Go away from me, Lord," says Peter, "for I am a sinful man!"

"Do not fear," says Jesus. "From now on you will be catching people." In case you missed it, that's a joke. Yes, Jesus knew how to laugh! He's asking Peter to leave the only life he knows. It's a life where Peter experiences frustration—like a night with no fish. But it's also a life where everything is familiar. And Jesus is asking him to leave it. "Don't worry, Peter, it'll be a lot easier from now on. Look how easy it is to catch fish... Piece of cake! And from now on you'll *only* be catching people!"

Look, the point of this miraculous catch wasn't just to show off, and it wasn't to do Peter a favor. Jesus didn't bring Peter out onto the lake to fill his boat with fish so that he could cash in and retire—in fact, the story says that Peter and the others immediately left everything, including their amazing catch, to follow Jesus. No, Jesus went out on the lake with Peter so that Peter could see what happens when a flawed human being takes the risky, faithful step of acting on Jesus' word. He went out on the lake with Peter so that Peter's tentative, halting trust could be nourished and allowed to grow. So it doesn't surprise us to read that "when they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him."

This is a "call story," and it invites us to think about how Jesus is calling us. Most of us pastors have a call story, but we go wrong if we think it's *only* pastors that Jesus calls. And we also go wrong if we think Jesus *only* ever calls once, early on in our lives. A few years ago I remember talking with an older woman who had just had heart surgery. She felt as though God had given her the gift of a few more years, and the biggest question on her mind was, "What is God asking me to *do* with this time?" Jesus doesn't just call us once, but many times, throughout our whole lives.

Where is Jesus inviting you to step out in faith? No important call in my life has come out of nowhere... When I look back, I can see the baby steps were all there--the steps I needed to take to get to a bigger Yes. Today we learn that Jesus didn't ask Peter

first of all to leave everything and follow. But he did ask him to put aside his tiredness, to put aside his misgivings, to put out into deep water, let down his nets, and see what would happen.

Maybe some of you are facing baby-step calls. You know what I mean--you're being asked to make a choice that's not earth-shattering, but that *is* outside your comfort zone. You're being asked to put out into deep water with Peter. Maybe it's an opportunity for service at church... But maybe it's not. In this congregation there are folks who serve in so many ways—caring for a family member, cheering up folks in hospitals, building homes for unhoused families, looking in on neighbors, educating the next generation, standing up for people who are vulnerable and victimized. Is Jesus calling you to take a first step, calling you to serve in a new way, to put out on the water in faith? Maybe Jesus is calling you to say Yes to some new thing.

Or maybe—since our story ends with Peter and the disciples leaving everything they have behind—maybe that Yes needs to come with a No to other things. Is there something lifegiving for you or for others that you need to do, that you've been pushing aside because life is just too nuts, because there are so many other things occupying your time? What is Jesus calling you to say No to, so that you can say Yes to something better?

I can't tell you what your call is. But I can tell you that one man's life was changed when he stepped out in faith on Jesus' word. And I wonder what would happen if we all did the same... Amen.