

Why Not Sit in the Front Pew?
Dr. D. William McIvor
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Introduction to the Morning Lesson

In the scripture for last Sunday, what Jesus said offended the folks in his hometown synagogue, so much so that they tried to kill him. But the text last week ended with that remarkable verse which said “[Jesus] passed through the midst of them and went on his way.” (Luke 4.30) Their anger did not stop him. The way of Jesus Christ is going to go on whether we get angry with it or not. He is bringing light to the world and today’s text tells us more about what that looks like. Today’s text talks about Jesus calling disciples.

When we read the text don’t miss that the boat belonged to Simon. In an earlier chapter, we learn about the house he owned in Capernaum. In fact, that house may have served as Jesus’ base of operations during his early ministry. Owning a boat and a house means that Simon Peter was not just a poor fisherman but a fairly well-to-do citizen. The ancient world didn’t really have what we call a middle-class. But if it did have a one, Peter would have qualified. He was neither wealthy nor impoverished but firmly established in the middle. In other words, he was very much like you and me. So this story is not just about Jesus calling Peter. It’s also about Jesus calling us. Let’s read it in Luke 5.

Luke 5.1-11 (NRSV)

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Introduction

“Why Not Sit in the Front Pew?” That may seem like a strange title but it came to me from reflecting on the text’s first verse which describes people “pressing in on Jesus to hear the word of God.” They crowded him so much he had to step into Simon’s boat and move away from the shore. That doesn’t happen much in most Presbyterian churches. We always have room up front. Even on Easter, the front pews are often the last to fill. I don’t say this critically. When I go into a worship

service or even into a meeting, I normally do not sit in the front row. But I wonder why.

I think it has something to do with what happened to Simon Peter. He also wasn't in the front row. He just happened to have his boat there. We know he already knew Jesus but he had not made up his mind about him. I think he still wanted to stay in the background. But then Jesus reached out and brought him right to the front of things and Simon Peter was never the same. Maybe we don't sit in the front because we worry about something like that happening to us, too. Maybe we don't feel ready. So let's think about that. Are we ready for Jesus to call us today?

ONE: Where is your boat?

To get at that, I want to first ask, where is your boat? Jesus began with Simon by needing his boat. What does Jesus need from you? Where is your boat?

In asking this, I confess that the church has mostly taught the story backwards. The church has often taught the last verse — “they left everything and followed him” — as if that's the whole point. So often we teach the Bible as if it were only a morality tale where we get to the end and say “and the moral of the story is ...” So the moral of this story becomes *give up everything and follow Jesus*.

Is it any wonder that people reject this message? If someone says to give them everything we've got, we are more likely to feel robbed than called by God. Yes, there comes a time when people must give Christ their all. But notice that Jesus didn't begin with Peter asking for everything. He started out just needing Peter's boat. Where is your boat?

I really want this message to be heard by many who stand, as it were, at the edges of the church, afraid they might be pulled into the front pew. I think this word needs to especially be heard by many men. The church has often messed up on this teaching. But Jesus is very clear and he starts where you are. You don't have to understand everything or know everything or believe everything or do everything to be accepted by Jesus Christ. If you have doubts or fears, that's okay. Jesus starts where you are. Peter was just like us. He didn't want to sit in front. Jesus knew that and started off just asking for his boat. Where is your boat?

You don't even have to be very religious for Jesus. In this story, Simon and the others do not appear as religious seekers — in fact, just the opposite. While the crowds press in upon Jesus to hear his preaching, these fishermen are off in a corner away from the action, preoccupied with washing their nets after a hard night's labor. Jesus comes to Peter in the midst of his ordinary workday routine. What were Peter's qualifications for discipleship? What prepared him to recognize the Lord? The answer is almost comical in its simplicity — Peter had a boat! The working tools of Simon's ordinary work were enlisted into the service of Jesus Christ.¹

My friends, that means that Jesus starts off not being very interested in your being religious. He starts off being interested in what you do well and what you like to do. What are you good at? That's probably where Jesus wants to start with you just like with Peter. Where is your boat?

TWO: Put out into the deep water

Then here's a second thought. Jesus starts with us in our boats but he also gives us a challenge. “Put out into the deep water,” he said to Peter. He says the same to us. Go deep because that's where

¹ *Lectionary Homiletics* 3.3 (1992): 13.

you will find real blessing. Jesus wants us to go deep into the Spirit, to get beyond where things are safe and we are in control. Abundance is awaiting us but finding it means we have to go deep.

Now notice something about this. Jesus said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Did Simon Peter respond to that challenge with faith? No. Was he religious? No. Was he irritated? Probably. Here this preacher was telling a professional fisherman where to find fish. In fact, Peter responded with weary resignation: “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.” Peter knew there weren’t any fish out there. He’d seen days like this before when nothing was caught. He didn’t believe. But he did what Jesus said.

You don’t always have to believe, my friend. But do what Jesus says. It’s a cliché now but “Just Do It” is right. Do what Jesus says. Go deep because there is abundance. Even when you haven’t found it before, don’t be afraid to go deep.

So what happened to Peter when he caught so many fish the boats were sinking? He went from weary resignation to fear and self-condemnation. He told Jesus, “Get away from me. I’m a sinner. I don’t deserve this.” That’s right. Peter was a sinner. He didn’t deserve God’s abundance. I’m a sinner. I don’t deserve God’s blessing. You are sinners. You don’t serve the blessings either. But they are there in abundance. We just need to go deep to find them.

I think we hang around where it’s safe because we are afraid of God’s grace. We talk about grace, sing about grace, and think that we live by grace. In reality, grace makes us uncomfortable sometimes. It’s much easier to deal with getting what we deserve. Then we know what to expect. But God wants us to get rid of “if” religion and safe faith and experience joy in the abundance God alone provides. Yes, going deep isn’t safe. We may get hurt sometimes and God isn’t a magic genie who whisks us away from trouble. But God is wonderful and has for us abundance of life. Go deep and we’ll discover it.

Conclusion

I asked earlier, are we ready for Jesus to call us? Like Peter, our honest, natural answer is “not today, Lord. We’ve been at it a long time with nothing to show for it.” But Jesus still calls us. He doesn’t give up on us, so let’s not give up on ourselves. He invites us to go deep, not alone, but with him. Even when we don’t believe it, let’s try it. Let Jesus get into your boat and you just may be surprised at how many fish will flop themselves in too.

After Peter went deep, Jesus said to him, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” (Luke 5.10) Of course, that thought scares most Presbyterians all the more. The thought that we might “evangelize” is just about the scariest thing that many Presbyterians can think of. So don’t think of it that way. Think of doing just what Jesus did. He loved people. That’s what we need to do.

There was a woman in a mental hospital in Washington who was just sick and tired of hearing her chaplain tell her how much God loved her. She heard him say this again and again, and it just didn’t ring true; she didn’t believe it. Finally, she said to the chaplain, “Please, stop telling me how much God loves me. First, you love me. Then I’ll know that God loves me.”²

So we are called to be lovers. In the hymn we are going to sing in a moment, a hymn that is based on this text in Luke, one of the verses is a prayer to the Lord.

² Henry Brinton, ed., “Inflatable Church,” *Homiletics* 16.1 (2004): 42.

You need the caring of my hands.
Through my tiredness, may others find resting.
You need a love that just goes on loving.

Then the refrain:

O Lord, with Your eyes You have searched me,
And, while smiling, have called out my name.
Now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me,
Now with You I will seek other seas.

May it be so with us.