

Miraculous Repentance
Dr. D. William McIvor
February 7, 2010
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Introduction to the Morning Lesson

I think we Christians often imagine that the first disciples were special people. Saints we call them — St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Luke — and unconsciously we imagine that they were somehow more holy or spiritual than normal folks like us and that's probably why Jesus chose them. But today's text says something very different. The disciples were not being spiritual when Jesus called them or even very religious. They weren't in church, that is, synagogue. They were ... fishing. They were earning their living as fishermen when Jesus met them and asked them to follow him.

In fact, the text suggests that Jesus did not call Simon Peter and the other fishermen because they were especially qualified in any way. The disciples' fitness for following Jesus came about only because of the him.¹ In other words, Jesus called ordinary people and then transformed them into the persons he wanted them to be. Jesus calls us in the same way. 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

I suppose it has happened more than once that a person had a choice of going to church or going fishing and chose fishing. Or a choice of going to church or work and chose work. Or a choice of going to church or almost anything else and chose almost anything else. Even people who frequently do go to church may find that they often choose something else when they could choose church.

Guess what? It doesn't matter where you go. Jesus is going to come after you. Hang a "Gone Fishin'" sign on your life, if you like, but Jesus is still going to come after you. For the Lord isn't locked up inside these walls from Sunday afternoon to the next Sunday morning. You're not safe

¹ R. David Kaylor, "Exegesis," *Lectionary Homiletics* 9.3 (1998): 9.

from him when you're not here because he will meet you out there wherever you are. The text teaches that quite clearly and I want to reflect with you for a few minutes today about what this means for us. Here are a couple of thoughts.

ONE: Avoid compartmentalizing life

That Jesus meets us wherever we are means, first, that we ought to avoid compartmentalizing our lives. Jesus wants to relate to every aspect of our lives because he is the one who truly knows the way in life.

Quite a few years ago, two land surveyors were sent from a large city in Wales to survey the mountains in North Wales. They stayed for a week at an isolated shepherd's cottage. During the day they climbed the steep slopes, charted the contours, checked the landmarks, and traced the mountain streams to their sources. They marked every down detail on a map and each night they returned to the cottage to stay with the shepherd.

Near the end of the week, just before retiring for the night, the old shepherd suggested he accompany them on the mountain the next day. "There's no need," the confident men of the city replied. "We can't possibly get lost. We have our compass, our charts, and the map."

"I'd better come with you," the old shepherd insisted.

"There's really no need," they replied again. "The map will bring us home."

The old man persisted, "But I know the mountain tracks like the back of my hand. I know where the steep precipices are. I know where the bog runs deep. I know where the bracken covers the crevices."

"It's all on the map," repeated the city men. "The map will bring us home."

So early the next morning the surveyors headed out into the mountains. And later that day the old shepherd went out and found them and rescued them, for they had become hopelessly, dangerously lost. The old man was quiet until they arrived back at the cottage. Then all he said was, "You did have a map, but this fog isn't on your map."

Friends, it doesn't matter how good we are or how smart we are or how well prepared we are. There are times when we're going to be lost and we need someone who *really* knows the way, even through the fog of life.

That's the point of the text. Simon Peter made a living by fishing. He knew that lake and he knew how to fish it. He assumed he was better qualified to direct the fishing than was Jesus who, as far as Simon knew, was just a small-town carpenter who was now doing some preaching. Yet, when Simon did what Jesus said, the results were far beyond anything he could have expected.²

We've got to stop compartmentalizing Jesus into just parts of our lives, a good help for "spiritual matters" but irrelevant for other parts of life. For our jobs, we rely on company policy and procedures or expert techniques; for our family life, we utilize sociology and psychology; for national issues, we rely on politics; for world issues, we rely on diplomacy and military power; for finances, we rely on economics. Oh yes, for spiritual matters, maybe we bring in Jesus.³

But Jesus is the Way for all of life and he won't stay compartmentalized in church or in spiritual things. He knows the way through any fog and he wants to be with us and guide us in every

² Brian A. Nelson, "Theological Themes," *Lectionary Homiletics* 9.3 (1998): 10.

³ Nelson, 10.

aspect of life. In fact, we don't really know about life until we have connected everything to Jesus.

TWO: Aware of God's presence and power

A second insight that this text opens up for us is that we must become aware of God's presence and power in our lives. When the boat was sinking for all the fish they caught, even after Simon told Jesus that more fishing wouldn't do any good, it finally dawned on Simon who he was dealing with. He became aware of God's presence and power in Jesus and he said, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" We need to be like Simon Peter and recognize with whom we are dealing.⁴

Simon Peter demonstrated his lack of faith in Jesus when he doubted there were any fish out there in deeper waters. Having been proven wrong, he fully recognized his shortcoming of faith and in effect he said, "You'd better go on without me, Lord, for I am a sinful man; I'm bad news for you."⁵

How did Jesus respond? He promoted Simon. "Don't be afraid, Peter. Tomorrow you'll be fishing for people." You see, understanding sin may be our greatest difficulty — for we tend to equate sin only with badness. But sin is more profound than that. Sin is wrong because it breaks relationships — with God, with others, and even with ourselves. Sin is a kind of self-centeredness that eliminates God from the center of our living, when we tend to proclaim our own sufficiency over God's sufficiency. But when we've realized that we are sinners, then God can begin to work with us. That's what happened to Simon and Jesus put him to work.

Simon said, "I'm not worthy to be with you." Jesus' reply is, in effect, "Fine, now we're ready to get to work; if you didn't see this about yourself, you would be no good to anyone. Now let's all put out into the deep together, for the real challenge of life and the real rewards are out there, not in these shallow waters of little sins we like to worry about so much."⁶

This is why I called my sermon "Miraculous Repentance." The miracle in the story was not the big catch of fish. The miracle was Peter repenting. When we admit that we are not all we need, a miracle takes place and there becomes space in our lives for Jesus. Then we start being useful for what God wants us to do and to be.

Conclusion

At first, Peter was pretty sure that doing what Jesus asked wouldn't do much good. But when his fishing nets were bursting with fish flip-flopping in the air, spraying water and foam everywhere, Peter had a change of heart. He had been fishing all night and was dead tired. But Jesus said, "Try again, Peter." He did. And God surprised him. From then on Peter was a disciple.

⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 205. "More important is the question whether the saying belongs to a post-resurrection scene, since (it is argued) Simon's confession presupposes a concrete sin, namely his denial of Jesus. But while *αμαρτωλος* is often used of persons guilty of open, scandalous behavior (5:30; 19:7), it can be used also in a more general moral sense (13:2; 24:7). What Simon expressed was the sense of unworthiness (Mt. 8:8; Job 42:5f.) and fear (Jdg. 6:22; 13:22; 1 Kgs. 17:18; Is. 6:5) which men should feel in the presence of the divine (cf. 18:13). The revelation of Jesus' divine power in this epiphany sufficed to demonstrate to Simon that he was in the presence of the Holy One (cf. 4:34) and to make him aware of his own inadequacy. A post-resurrection setting is not required."

⁵ Donald B. Ward, "Put Out Into the Deep," *Lectionary Homiletics* 9.3 (1998): 15.

⁶ Ward, 15.

There's a song I like that is really a prayer from Peter or from you or from me, a prayer saying to Jesus, "I know you need me, Lord, and as tired as I am, I will follow because you've called. I'll leave my boat behind and sail now with you."

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

God *will* meet us outside of church, if we just recognize him. God will meet us in our work places. In our homes and schools. In our relationships with our spouses or our children or our neighbors or our friends. And in meeting us, he calls us to a new way of living and loving. Thanks be to God.