

You Are Worthy

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Virginia A. Fifield,
February 28, 2010, at the First United Methodist Church of Redlands, CA

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Luke 5:1-11

Introduction to Luke 5:1-11

Reading from *Today's English Version*, today's gospel lesson from Luke 5: 1-11, finds us with Jesus on the shore of Lake Genesaret, where we are about to witness Simon Peter's encounter with God. In the same sense in which it was true for both Isaiah and the apostle Paul, Peter's experience of God also occurs in the midst of while he and his partners are at work. Jesus had met these men before when they were associated with John the Baptizer. But this time, it's during their daily round of making an honest day's living--**fishing**, and they've caught nothing! It was a very bad day! And they are feeling thoroughly demoralized!

What else is—from what we can tell, it's **significant** that none of these men were **consciously** seeking God; yet, in the midst of the boring but necessary routine of their lives, they come to experience a new knowledge not only of God, but of themselves. Of this experience, theologian, Karl Rahner, has said that ***“Our daily round of work is full of Holy significance”—a preparation for greatness. And it is in the midst of this daily round that what is Holy (in our lives) happens.”***

The invitation to us in today's gospel lesson is to see if we, like Peter, can begin to identify, in the daily routine of our own lives, those moments when we experience “the Holy”—a new knowledge not only of God, but of our own self as a child of God.

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Last Wednesday night after dinner, a bunch of us gathered with Pastor Karen, to embark on a 4-to-5 week Lenten faith journey in spiritual formation

Trevor Hudson, in our guidebook, defines spirituality as *“being intentional about the development of those convictions, attitudes, and actions, through which the Christ-following life, is shaped and given personal expression within our everyday lives. In a nutshell, it is the way of ‘transforming discipleship’.”*ⁱ

And that *“Our faith journey depends upon the roads that transform us as we travel . . . Roads that transform not only with challenges that enable us to do more work in God's name, but challenges us to become more of who God desires us to be”.*ⁱⁱ

Today we're invited on a spiritual faith journey in the everyday life of Simon Peter, as he makes his way through a transforming, life-changing event. It's an event that invites and

challenges each of us to look deeply into our own personal journeys of faith, and how our lives have been *transformed* or *changed* because of your growing relationship with God, and where that has led you.

Though we know each person's spiritual journey and call to discipleship is different and unique, there are some distinct characteristics common to them all. I call them "the three R's", each of which relate to the other somewhat sequentially—they're called ***Realization, Repentance and Readiness***.

For instance, during Peter's fishing expedition, he's astounded at the great catch of fish, and in being so, becomes profoundly **aware** of the power of God at work in Jesus. And in this dual ***realization*** of who Jesus **is**, and of **himself** before Jesus, he's led to ***repentance***, saying to Jesus "***Get away from me, Lord! Get out of here! I am a sinful man!***" (I am not worthy!)

You may remember how Peter's awareness of his need for repentance would haunt him again and again in his life--every time he failed, and particularly when he denied even knowing Jesus. Still, his ***readiness*** to follow Jesus as his disciple, was evidenced in the fact, that he "***left everything***" when Jesus called him.

But there's more to the story. It's on page 893 in the pew Bible, if you'd like to follow along.

First of all, with some background study, we see that Luke has combined the call of the first disciples, with what was probably a post-resurrection experience of the risen Jesus. In doing this, Luke helps us become aware of the close connection between a person's "***Call***" **to** discipleship and mission, and the eventual successful outcome ***of*** that mission.

Second, notice in verse 5, that "the great catch of fish", was simply realized by the authority of Jesus' **word**. Earlier in Luke's gospel, Jesus had, by the power of his word, **exorcised** demons (4:33-36), **healed** Peter's mother-in-law (4:29), and **moved** people to amazement in the synagogue (4:22).

Aware of all this, Peter **responded** to Jesus' **word** (to put his nets out again); **and**, in what was to happen next (the great catch of fish), **recognized** in Jesus, the power and presence of God's very self. And so, in verse 8, when he addressed Jesus as "Lord", Peter reflected an awareness of himself as an unworthy sinner in God's presence.

And then, in calming Peter's fear, Jesus explains to Peter, that this great catch of fish is to be understood as a **sign** of his **new** purpose—his new **mission** in life.

So along with James and John, Peter is commissioned by Jesus to "**catch people**". In Greek, by the way, the word "**catching**" is *zogreo*, which means "***to take them alive***"—it's what

we do when we go fishing. With a lure (bait), we catch or *“take the fish alive”!* In the same way, Jesus calls his disciples, *“to catch/take people alive”*, and do it confidently with the *“bait”*—with the lure of God’s word.

But there’s still more to the story: Jesus has moved from the shoreline and is now in Peter’s boat, and tells him to *“put out into the deep water; and let your nets down for a catch.”* The word *“deep”*, in Luke, is the same as the *“deep”* in Genesis 1, where it says *“ . . . the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the deep . . .”*. The word, *“deep”* (in Genesis) refers to a pre-existing ocean, which was wild and angry, fierce and frenzied. It was energy-itself, but unharnessed and unfocused—pointless, meaningless chaos. So Jesus has Peter *“put out into the deep.”*

On one level, Jesus is telling Peter to fish where the water is deep and the fish are big. On another level, he’s telling Peter to let down the net in *“chaos”* itself—into wild and angry waters. And when they had done this, they caught so many fish that their *“nets were beginning to break.”*

It’s remarkable—Jesus telling them to put their nets into the very thing that represents one of their greatest fears. But with Jesus with them, they bring in so many fish they can’t handle the catch by them-selves. *“So they signaled their partners in the other boat to help them. And they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.”*

Jesus then says to Peter, *“Don’t be afraid: from now on you will be catching people.”* Ahh, what happens next in Gennesaret (the Sea of Galilee), is what’s to happen from now on in Peter’s life, our own lives, and in the life of our own Church. We’re to let down our nets into that which is most enervating. We’re to let down our nets into *“the deep”* —into chaos-itself, and stick with it—stay with it until our nets are full; even when we echo Peter’s pleading, *“but Master, we’ve worked hard all night long, and have caught nothing.”* Like Peter, we don’t want to be where our efforts are for nothing. But Jesus says, *“Push the boat out (even) further into ‘the deep’”* —into some of the very things that represent our greatest fear. In essence, Jesus says, *“stay with it!” “Stick with me!” “Follow me! We can handle this together!”*

But then, we still wonder, why should we? Why not leave—it’d be easier to not have to! I mean, why did Peter stay—even though his experience was telling him that it would be for nothing? So where is *“the deep”*—*“the deep”* in your own life? Where does Jesus call you to put down your net and to *“stay with it”*? Why should you stay anywhere? Think about it!

A woman is cleaning up a mess in the kitchen after a long and difficult day at her other job. Her husband bounds in from work and asks *“What’s for supper?”*

And suddenly, unbidden, out of the accumulation of years of experiences like this, the wife says ***“Who do you think you are? I work as hard as you do, at half the pay! Why don’t you cook supper? You men do everything else! You run the world and start the wars and make the laws. We women just cleanup the messes you make!”***

And the man shouts back, ***“Then why don’t you just leave?”***

“That’s what I was thinking,” she replies, slamming a dishrag into the sink. But on her short trek to the door, she thinks about the kids and job insecurity and no insurance, and no place to go. So she stays and fixes the meal.

A teenager’s been grounded for one of many violations of the adult order of things. Brooding in his room, he innocently believes he only, is person-ally being mistreated by this particular set of parents. But his subconscious dimly suggests otherwise: that he is on the wrong side of a generation gap that didn’t exist in “saner” times!

So he says to his parents, ***“It’s not fair to ground me.”*** Clear enough, but even clearer is the parental response: ***“Under this roof, you do as I say, or you get out!”***

As he packs his CD’s and other stuff, he thinks how nice it will be to play them as loud as he wants, and stay out as late as he pleases. Picking through his socks and shirts, he remembers that from now on, he’ll have to wash own clothes, and cook his own meals. Then suddenly realizes his part-time job doesn’t bring in enough to pay rent. He’s just a kid with no place to go. So he unpacks. (P)

People have all sorts of reasons for staying with things, for sticking with it, for “hanging in”. But in today’s gospel lesson, Peter’s first reaction to Jesus’ more-than-human side is **not** to stay, but to run—saying ***“Get away from me . . . get out of here, Lord: I’m a sinful man!”*** (“Not worthy!” to stay and follow you—to be your disciple!”)

That may sound humbly realistic, but remember—Peter’s religious outlook had led him to believe that direct contact with the divine could kill. So for Peter, **staying** wasn’t a good idea. He’d need lots of reassurance. In his felt-unworthiness, he’d have to be told, again and again, that he was more than he had ever imagined himself to be. (p)

How often do you and I settle for an achievement or a dream with boundaries no larger than the Sea of Galilee? I’m thinking particularly of our capacity for goodness and Christian quality. We think little of Jesus’ command that we should be perfect as your Father-God in Heaven is perfect (Mt 5:48). We tend to discount the words as a kind of ancient hyperbole, or we push it aside with self-deprecating laughter: ***“Perfect? Who, me?--you gotta be kidding!”***

Nor do we take seriously enough our potential for the fruit of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, and kindness are such beautiful qualities—and ones we like to find in others; so why don't we pursue them more hopefully and expectantly for ourselves? I think it's partly because we have put up boundaries as confining as the Sea of Galilee. Jesus wanted Peter to fish for human beings. Until the moment of that revelation, Simon Peter apparently would have been content to spend his nights on Galilee. That's not to disparage the fishermen of Galilee. It's only to say that a person ought not too quickly place too small boundaries around his or her own soul.

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The focal point of the story is Jesus' call to Simon Peter, James and John, to become fishers of human souls. It's about staying and following Jesus, but it begins with that frantic impulse to leave him. Probably, a lot of us would be glad to skip this part of the story because we're uneasy with the whole concept of "soul-winning". We can't imagine ourselves buttonholing people, offending them, or intruding upon their privacy. We've got all kinds of fears, "hang-ups" and negative images in mind--images that keep us from getting serious about our calling to be witnesses to our faith.

Maybe our greatest problem is that we try to make such witnessing, an isolated part of life, rather than as a part of the natural flow of our daily living. And that's the impressive thing about Jesus' own pattern of faith-sharing. His encounters with Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, and the rich young ruler, don't seem to be structured and set up. They "**just happened**", so to speak. These were persons to Jesus, not people to be met with a formula.

Most of our witnessing, I think, is likely to hap-pen in passing moments of conversation—those occasions when we show, in relatively minor ways, who we are and to whom we belong.

I think of a woman in my Borrego Springs congregation who was playing tennis with her good-but-quite-secular friends. In a conversation break between sets, she began referring to something she had read that morning. She told how it would have been easy to say, "*I read something this morning . . .*". But instead, she simply introduced one word: she said "*In my devotional reading this morning.*" It wasn't a major big deal, soul-winning engagement. But still, it was a true sowing of a seed. By a word, she had opened the door for some further conversation.

Recently over at Albertson's grocery store, I'd been scurrying around in one of those electric grocery carts, loading it with the items I needed, and was now in the checkout line. Trying to gently "motor" my way through the narrow line, and at the same time, trying to

transfer my stuff to that conveyer-belt thing to the cashier, my cart accidentally bumped into the lady in front of me. And I started apologizing profusely, saying “*Oo, I’m so sorry!*”

She turned and with this exceptionally beautiful smile on her face, simply said, “*That’s all right: YOU’RE worthy!*” And “*by the way, I’ve seen you in here, and you always look so happy, and I love your laughter! Where do you get that from?*” And I simply said “*It’s God!*” And for those shared few moments, there was this spiritual connection through the mutual affirmation of each’s worthiness as a person and child of loving God.

After I got home that day, and had put away the groceries, I began to reflect on the “worthiness” gift I had received that day. And how important it is, from time-to-time, to be reminded of our worthiness as children of a loving God. And then I remembered, how could I not be worthy! God’s love for me surely doesn’t depend on my not knowing (at the age of 72) how to cook, or how to peel an onion—that you don’t use a potato peeler to do it! Or, that (at 73) I managed to swallow my hearing aid (that looks exactly like a cashew nut)! Needless-to-say, it really helps to have a sense of humor and not take yourself too seriously. (Still, I can’t believe I really did those things—especially the hearing aid!)

And then there was that little incident in the pizza parlor when I was in college (you all remember that). God has to love me!

Maybe our greatest problem in becoming Jesus’ fisher-people is that we’re not enough in earnest to grasp the opportunities that come to us; or we’re so possessed of the idea that we must say something dramatic and profound that we fail to say the small, immediate, and potentially significant thing. To put it in the language of today’s scripture lesson, most of us really don’t act as if we even have a call to “fish”. We’re out in the waters of human need every day, but we don’t seem to know it. And it’s not that we should become more aggressive about sharing our faith. I think it’s more that we need to be more sensitive to the world around us, and to the subtle prodding of the Holy Spirit. These two sensitivities, I think, are wonderfully intertwined: to be sensitive to the *Holy Spirit* must mean that we will be more sensitive to people and their pain; to be more sensitive to *people* ought to make us more open to God and to God’s purposes.

Put differently, all of us are a collection of fears, joys, strengths, weaknesses, sins, and goodness. And God is ready and able to meet us at any of these points of reality. If we’re willing to be a channel through which God can touch the life of another person, even in the most routine way, God is finding a place in that person’s life. And that small place, like leaven in the lump, can eventually influence the whole life. We don’t have to be theologians to do this—or to be blazing witnesses. All we need do is care enough about others to want to help, and to believe

deeply enough in the presence and power of a loving God, that we will tell them that God can help.

Who knows what a catch we'll make? The opportunity came to Simon Peter in the wake of a night of defeat. And we, like Peter, are out in the waters of human need every day, allied with Jesus, the very One who'll lead us into a life of **full** nets, with enough loving care to share in all our passing relationships.

Friends in Christ, I'm here today to remind you that you are worthy! Worthy of Jesus' *Call* to be "fishers of people"—to "head into the **deep**", to fill your nets full with the **lure**—the "**bait**" of God's word and unconditional love! Thanks be to God!

i The Way of Transforming Discipleship, Hudson, p.15, *Upper Room Books*, 2005.

ii Ibid.,L. Smith, p.15.