

## Can You Leave Your Net Behind?

### Text

#### Luke 5:1-11

[1] One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God, [2] he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. [3] He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

[4] When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

[5] Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

[6] When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. [7] So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

[8] When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" [9] For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, [10] and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." [11] So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

### Exposition

Can you remember the first time you really understood who Jesus was? Perhaps when your first invited Jesus into your life to be your Lord and Savior? Especially if you came to Christ as an older child, teenager, or adult, the events surrounding that occasion are indelibly imprinted in your mind. Today we're studying what is surely an eyewitness account of the calling of Peter, James, and John, carefully transcribed by Luke, and placed in his Gospel. Matthew 4: 18-22 and Mark 1: 16-20 both record the call of Peter and

Andrew, James and John along the shore. But Luke's account is especially vivid.

I want you to use your imagination and try to put yourself at the shore of the Sea of Galilee this morning. Jesus is standing by the "Lake of Gennesaret" (another name for the Sea of Galilee) surrounded by people. They are "crowding" him. Imagine yourself as one of those people. Maybe you're wearing sandals, or perhaps you're barefoot, and you feel the round stones on the beach under your feet -- no sandy beaches here. You're straining to see over the people in front of you, because Jesus is speaking and you don't want to miss a word.

## **Fishing Nets**

Fishermen have fished the waters of this lake for thousands of years. Occasionally people would fish with a hook and line (Matthew 17:24-27), but commercial fishing took place with nets and teams of fishermen to handle them. They primarily used two types of nets:

**Casting net.** Poorer fishermen who didn't own boats could use casting nets along the shore. The casting net was thrown out over the water. Weights at the edge would pull the net to the bottom, catching any fish that might be under it. The net opening was 10 to 20 feet (3 to 6 meters) in diameter. The fisherman would wade out to the net, and gather it in, bringing any fish to shore.

**Seine (SAN) net or drag net.** These were large vertical wall-like nets that could be attached to the shore or to another boat. A boat could drag the other end out into the water in a semicircular arc and then back to the shore again, pulling in the fish as it came. Then a team of fishermen on both ends of the net would heave it into shore. One might dive in the center to disentangle it from any rocks or obstructions on the bottom as the net dragged across.

Another way to use this kind of net was to take it into deep water, often at night and sometimes with another boat, and lay it out the floats at the top of the net in a long line across the water. Fish might be driven into the net by the splashes of the fisherman. Then the ends would be pulled together surrounding a school of fish, and they would be pulled on board the boat. ]

You can imagine the need for mending the nets. Disentangling fish from the nets sometimes broke the fibers, as did debris from the lake bottom, or the strain of too many fish. The hours must have been rugged. The best deep water fishing was at night, then the mornings would be given to mending

the nets, sorting fish, and perhaps using casting nets along the shore if their nights labors hadn't "netted" any fish (Matthew 4:18; Mark 1:16).

Peter and his brother Andrew, and their neighbors James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were partners, often working together as they fished the Sea of Galilee. They fished commercially. They would sell their fish fresh in the local markets. The rest they would salt and dry for export as far as Spain.[6] As owners of their own ships who sometimes hired others to help, Peter and his partners should be regarded as members of the lower middle class, rather than a very low social class.[7]

### Teaching from Peter's Boat (5:2-3)

Ok here we go: Jesus is teaching by the lakeside, crowded by the people. He sees a couple of fishing boats pulled up on the shore, and asks the owner of one, Simon Peter, if he would put out a little from shore. Then he sits down in the boat and teaches the people.

I can see Jesus twenty or thirty feet out from shore, sitting in the boat which is bobbing slightly. His voice carries well across the water. And the people along the shore stop their crowding, and sit down to listen.

In the boat, listening as well, is Peter. I think he's proud that his boat can be used by the Teacher, and that he can sit next to him, publicly sharing a bit of the glory.

### **Miraculous Catch of Fish (5:4-7)**

But the glory ends when Jesus concludes his teaching and dismisses the people. On some occasions he prays for the sick after the formal teaching, but not today. Jesus turns to Peter with a request, almost a command: "Put out into the deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." He is speaking to Peter when he tells him to launch out into the deeper water, but "let down the nets for a catch" is spoken to Peter's crew as well, for the verb is plural.

I wonder what is the expression on Peter's face? Is it weariness -- or more? He replies, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets" (5:5). Is he humoring Jesus? Or honoring him? Or is he weary beyond the point of caring. Maybe he bites his tongue rather than explain to his new landlubber friend that the best fishing is done at night, and that in the daytime the catch isn't nearly as good.

But he doesn't argue. He pulls in the anchor that has held them in the shallows just off shore, and pulls up the sail so that it catches the breeze coming off the western hills. The boat begins to pick up a little speed until they are out in the deeper parts. Now Peter is the example of efficiency. He'll show Jesus how real fisherman do things -- even if they don't catch anything. One end of the net goes over the side, and Peter and his crew play out the long net until it is extended full length, floats bobbing on the surface. Now he fastens the other end of the net to the far end to the boat.

All off a sudden they feel a jolt, the lines become taut, and the boat leans over at a dangerous angle. Jesus grabs the gunwale to keep from going overboard. A whole school of fish has hit the net and are pulling hard against the boat. Peter is instantly alert, and begins to give orders pulling in the ropes on the net to bring it closer to the boat. It is a huge catch, Peter can tell. He steadies himself by the mast and shouts at the top of his lungs across the water where his partners James and John are still mending nets.

"H-E-L-P U-S," he shouts into the wind. "C-O-M-E A-N-D H-E-L-P U-S!"

Far away on the shore he can see that they've heard him and are running for their boat. Now he turns back to the task at hand and doesn't look up until James' and John's boat is alongside, helping to pull fish out of the net into their boat, flapping, flopping on the boat bottom. Jesus, too, is pulling fish aboard as fast as he can. The men work noiselessly until the last of the huge catch is into the boats. The gunwales of the boats are now dangerously close to the waterline.

Carefully, oh, so carefully, they row the laden boats ashore, not relaxing until they can hear the prow crunch on the rocks of the beach. It is the biggest catch they have EVER brought in. And not at night, but in the middle of the day!

### **Peter's Call (5:8-11)**

Jesus has stepped out of the boat into the shallows and up onto the dry shore. Peter sees him, leaps over the side of the boat and falls at Jesus' knees. For a moment he can't speak. You can see that he is overcome by emotion and his recent exertion. Jesus waits.

"Depart from me, Lord," Peter finally gasps out. "I am a sinful man."

Jesus puts his hand on Peter's shoulder, and looks down at him. "Don't be afraid," he says. "From now on you will be catching men."

You can see Peter nodding his head. He knows it is true. Finally he lifts his eyes to meet Jesus' eyes. "Yes, Lord, if you'll show me how... But wait just one minute until we get these boats pulled all the way up. We don't want to lose a catch like this."

James and John help Peter and Andrew as they pull first Peter's boat, and then their own boat up onto the shore. Then they leave everything where it is and begin to follow Jesus.

### **Taking Men Alive (5:10)**

I don't wonder what Peter felt, for I've felt it, too -- an overwhelming sense of unworthiness in the face of the outstanding miracle he has just witnessed. This is no ordinary man. He heals, he teaches good news, and he can command hundreds of fish and tell a couple of fishermen where to go to find them. Peter is overwhelmed and humbled. His pride has drained away, and all that is left is his sense of sinfulness in the presence of this Man.

But Jesus doesn't let him grovel. He tells him not to fear.

And then he says some wonderful words that Peter will never "From now on you will be catching men." The verb used here is nearly unique in the New Testament: "to capture alive" or "to spare life," and it builds on the idea of the miraculous "catch." The word is used in the Septuagint and in Greek literature in the vocabulary of war and hunting. Peter had been catching fish to kill and sell them. But now he will be taking men alive to give them liberty.[9] The only other time the word is used in the New Testament is in 2 Timothy 2:25-26, "Those who oppose [the Lord's servant] he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will." Men can either be live captives of Satan, or freed servants of Jesus. Jesus "captures" men to free them.

Of course, my re-creation of the story above goes beyond the words of Scripture. Thank you for giving me the freedom to try to imagine how it might have happened that morning.

### **Leaving Everything and Following (5:11)**

The final sentence of this passage marks a turning point for both Jesus and for the fisherman. "So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him" (5:11). There is both the negative and the positive, the leaving and the following.

I've wondered about Mrs. Peter and the other fisher families in Capernaum. Yes, Peter and the men came back often, since Jesus was using Capernaum as his base-of-operations in Galilee. But they were gone so much of the time. Did they rent out the boats to others who took over the business in their absence? Or did Zebedee, father of Peter's partners, help them out? Did the amazing two boat full of fish tide over the families until the fishermen returned? We don't know nor are we told.

What we are told is that while once Peter was catching fish, now he is catching men. And to do the second he had to stop doing the first.

Does this mean that we must all quit our jobs when we are called? No. But some must. We see others who became part of Jesus' band -- Levi, the tax collector, "got up, left everything, and followed him" (5:28). Excuses aren't accepted. "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God," Jesus told other would-be followers (9:57-62). The Rich Young Ruler was called to sell everything he had, and to come, follow Jesus, but didn't (18:22-23).

My friends, we cannot drag all of our lives behind us and still be obedient followers. Some things have to go. The good can be the enemy of the best. There is a letting go so we can follow fully. What can you continue to do and still be a good disciple? What is Jesus' speaking to you to leave behind?

Not only was this a turning point for the fishermen, but it marked a new era for Jesus. Now he had followers who were with him constantly from this day until the day he was crucified.

They "left everything and followed him" (5:11)

## **Called to Following**

I can remember when I was first called to be a disciple. One Sunday I was struck with the realization that though I believed in Jesus, I had NOT given my life to him. There was belief without commitment. I struggled with this for several Sundays, trying to "hold out" at the close of the service. Finally,

### **Speak about the time when they had the business meeting. What made you say "Yes?"**

"Yes" to what? I didn't know then. But "yes" to following Jesus where he led me, and "yes" to do what he asked me to do. It's been an interesting journey, not always an easy one. But I have never been sorry that I said "yes" to Jesus' call way back then.

How about you? Have you sensed Jesus calling you? What have you done about it? Is he extending the call again, now, in a deeper way than before? What will you do? There's a very real sense that our call to be followers, disciples, of Jesus takes precedence over every other responsibility or vocation we have. He must become first -- before father or mother, spouse or children (14:26). His call is preeminent.

But it is a joy some journey, too. It's a walk with him, with his encouragement and comfort, his direction and guidance, his teaching and infusion of meaning, and his presence when I am afraid. There is pain, yes. But there is joy in this journey of following Jesus. If, for whatever reason, you've sat down by the pathway alongside the road -- from discouragement or tiredness or depression or disappointment -- I want to invite you to get up again, and get back in step with the Master today on the Jesus Walk. They "left everything and followed him" (5:11). Me, too, Lord. Me, too.

The journey that I have been on and Edna has so lovingly accepted and been willing to sacrifice has led me to many places and experiences. What seemed like an insurmountable task is now coming to a new chapter. With her support, the support from family and friends and the support from The UCCMACC and especially from God a new adventure will unfold. I have to admit I'm a little nervous about the future but I have faith in God and God has never let me down but I have let God down more times than I want to mention. God forgives us. That was the promise spoken from Jesus.

**Let us pray:**

Lord, thank you so much for revealing yourself to me. I know you were speaking powerful to Peter on that day when his nets bulged with your fish. You got his attention, all right. And you have mine, too. I want to be your disciple, to follow you wherever you take me. I'm on board, Lord. Thank you for the ticket. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.