

Duplicate Invitations

Luke 5:1-11

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.

Raise your hand if you like to go fishing. Raise your hand if you've never (or almost never) been fishing. Once again, the Bible gives us a story in a context that just doesn't resonate with lots of people in our modern world. Because even those of you who like fishing don't do it for a living. But even though this is a story in a fishing context, this one really isn't about fishing, so we can all understand what's happening.

Now, each of the four gospels are a little bit different in their content, but also in their writing style. One of the things that makes Luke appear unique is his ability to tell stories. Scholars tell us that both Matthew and Mark were already written when Luke wrote his gospel. So he was able to read how two other people remembered an event, then tell it with better details and with better flow. But that doesn't seem to be the case with our story this morning. Luke is kind of abrupt as he quickly jumps from one point of the story to the next. This is out of character for Luke, so it helps us to figure out what this story is, and isn't, about.

This story isn't about the crowd. Luke mentions them only to explain why Jesus is in the boat. He doesn't even talk about the message Jesus preaches to them. This story also isn't about the miracle of the great catch of fish. If it were, Luke would have given us much greater detail

about hauling them in. He would have mentioned what happened to the fish on shore. This story really isn't even about James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They become disciples here too, but they are mentioned almost as an afterthought.

This story is really about Simon, and how he came to follow Jesus. Remember the parable Jesus tells about the lost sheep? He says that a shepherd who has 100 sheep would leave 99 of them in the meadow to go searching for the one who was lost. And after finding that one sheep, he would rejoice more over that sheep than over the 99 who were well-behaved in the first place. Like that parable, our story this morning is really about just one person. Not someone who came, wanting to hear Jesus' words, but the one person present who didn't care what Jesus had to say.

Now our story this morning is not the first time Jesus and Simon meet. We don't know when they met, but in the story preceding this one, Jesus goes to Simon's house after worship. We can guess that if Jesus is going to Simon's house for dinner, they already have some kind of relationship. Once they get to Simon's house, Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law, who was sick. That's a pretty big deal, right? Lots of people in the Bible, after being healed by Jesus, jump up and follow him. Simon doesn't seem to have much of a reaction at all.

At their next encounter, Jesus invites Simon to participate in his movement by providing a boat. This is a pretty low-risk invitation. Sure, Simon probably won't be paid for this boat rental, but he isn't really committing himself to anything either. He's just providing a boat. Then Jesus preaches to the crowd – but the whole while, Simon is within earshot. Can you picture him? Probably at the other end of the boat, maybe still cleaning out his nets, thinking about what he's going to do different tomorrow night so he won't come home empty-handed. He's probably kind of bored. So I imagine he has at least half an ear cocked toward Jesus and what he's saying.

In a sense, by asking him to provide a boat, Jesus has created a captive audience. But again, this is a pretty low-risk way to invite Simon to his movement. After all, Simon doesn't have to listen to Jesus. No commitment is required of him.

After Jesus is done teaching the crowd, the risk level starts to rise. Jesus invites Simon to go fishing with him. He invites him to an activity of shared interest. This is an activity with medium risk. Why? Because Simon is an expert fisherman. He's been apprenticed to this career since he was probably about 11 years old. He knows that in the Sea of Galilee, you go fishing at night. You fish in shallow water. And Jesus wants him to go fishing in deep water in the middle of the day. Simon stands to lose face here.

As we read Simon's response, we can almost hear his annoyance with Jesus. "Fine Jesus. If you think you're such a great fisherman, we'll go out to deep water." Maybe Simon wants to make Jesus look silly, or maybe he's humoring him, or maybe Simon senses that Jesus may be able to do something unexpected. And then of course, Simon doesn't just catch fish, he catches so much that it's really too much for two boats to haul in.

When he sees these fish, this incredible miracle, Simon suddenly feels the weight of his sin. Whenever we meet someone who is the best at something, we are more likely to see the worst in ourselves. You think you are a good basketball player then you play a star, and you are suddenly aware that you will never be Michael Jordan. You think that you are, relatively speaking, unselfish. Then you meet someone who is truly dedicated to caring for others and you begin to see the mixed motives in your own life. That's what happened here to Simon. Faced with the amazing power of Jesus, finally really knowing who Jesus was, Simon felt his own unworthiness. Simon is afraid of the next step and the commitment it would involve.

The last thing Jesus does is to invite Simon to follow him. This is a high-risk moment. Jesus is finally asking Simon to commit fully and wholeheartedly to what he is doing. It means giving up everything and everyone he knows. It means walking away from the biggest catch of his lifetime! This is more than just offering Jesus the use of his boat. This means offering Jesus his life.

How does Jesus get Simon to say yes to something so radical? Jesus found a way to enter into life with Simon. First they were friends at the synagogue. Then Jesus borrowed his boat. These were low-risk activities for Simon. Then Jesus invites Simon to go fishing with him, which was a little bit riskier. But Jesus didn't ask Simon to risk everything and follow him until they had this very established relationship. And Simon, also called Peter, goes on to become the rock on which Christ built his church. But none of that would have happened if Jesus hadn't asked for Simon's participation.

I know most of us are uncomfortable inviting people to church. Either our friends already have churches, or they aren't the kind of people who would want to be at church. They're just not into church, or religion, or God. But notice that Jesus didn't invite Simon to church or temple. So often we think that the only way to invite people to be a part of the church is to invite them to worship. Inviting people to come to worship is a good thing, and some people will take you up on that invitation. But what we need to remember is that not everyone's going to respond to that invitation.

Jesus didn't say to Peter: "Come to church with me." He didn't say: "Let's sit down and I'll teach you how to pray." He didn't say: "Let's memorize some Bible verses." No, Jesus started off with Peter by putting him to work. Sure, worship and prayer and Bible reading are all very important. But for some people, maybe for most people, that's not the place to start. Instead

the place to start may be saying, “So you’re fisherman. Let me invite you to our men’s fishing weekend.”

The United Methodist Church has a new advertising campaign called 10 Thousand Doors. The concept is that there are at least 10,000 doors that will lead us into faithful discipleship. The front door of the church is only one way to find God. Many people make their first connection through a small group, like choir or a book club, or a fishing retreat. People are often very willing to join us for these low-risk activities. Especially if we ask them personally.

Jesus didn’t find his original followers by putting an ad in the Galilee Gazette saying “Evangelistic meeting tonight at 8:00 P.M. Come to the Temple. Pizza will be served.”

The Methodist movement didn’t really gain strength until John Wesley went into the fields and vacant lots and reached out to people, where they were. He found the dynamism of person-to-person contact. The Congregational Church began as a separatist movement in England. There was no way they could announce their meetings in the local churches. They had to visit people individually and whisper the news, as it was dangerous to go against the church laws of the land. The Apostle Paul traveled the Mediterranean world preaching the message, talking to any and all who listen, and churches were built.

The face-to-face encounter is still the best means to convey a message, to make a point, to welcome someone. And as you try to work up the courage to invite someone to join you at church, remember how Jesus approached Simon. He invited him to low-risk activities first. He entered into his life as a true friend. And he talked with him personally, one-on-one. And remember, Jesus healed Simon’s mother-in-law, and Simon didn’t pack his bags to follow Jesus. Most people have to hear the message several times in several ways before it really sinks in. So fear not; let us bravely and boldly share the message of our Lord. Amen and amen.