

When Too Much Just Isn't Enough

Sermon 5 | Greystone Baptist Church | February 10, 2019

Isaiah 43: 16 – 21 | Luke 5: 1-11

I come from a banking town. All my life I was aware of this, but I never really understood just how much of an impact it had on me until I moved away. Charlotte is a city with several major bank headquarters. Bank of America and Wells Fargo each own half of the buildings in the uptown area. It's funny, I recently learned that they're divided. Bank of America owns most of the property on the north side of Trade Street and Wells Fargo on the south. In addition to these two financial giants, there are satellite offices of other national investment firms. Deloitte & Touche, Goldman Sachs, you know the drill. Most of my friends back home are CPAs with MBAs. My home town is a banking town.

For most of my life I thought it was really interesting to travel to other places, other cities, rural areas, places with culture. You know, real culture... because Charlotte didn't really have any culture. It was just kind of, plain and normal.

The more time I spend away from my hometown, the more I realize that Charlotte does have a culture! It is a banking culture. It's a culture in which everyone's lives are on an 8 to 5 schedule. All of the traffic goes into the city center in the morning and back home away from the banks in the evenings. Productivity is prized above all else, and no one... I mean no one believes in risk. There's a whole sector of the market set up for this, it's called "Risk Management"... have you heard of it?

The older I get and the more removed from Charlotte I become, I realize that I have been shaped by this culture. While I am not a banker, I constantly think about productivity, perception, professionalism... and I will do just about anything I can to avoid risk, especially professional or financial risk.

So, when I think about today's reading from Luke's Gospel, I understand Simon Peter. We know from Luke's Gospel that Peter was a married man with a full-time job – fishing. He probably carried the financial responsibility of supporting his family with the income made out on the water. We also know that Peter knew Jesus before that day when he approached him at Lake Gennesaret. In Chapter 4, Jesus went to Peter's house and healed his mother-in-law from a fever. So, the encounter on lake Gennesaret is not the first time that Peter and Jesus come face to face.

It is, however, the first time that Jesus interrupts Peter at work. Peter must have been comfortable with Jesus coming into his house and healing the sick, and coming into the boat but when Jesus started meddling in his work and asking him to do things a little differently, well, Peter got a little cranky. And I can understand Peter. Really, I can. I don't even like it when somebody loads the dishwasher differently than I do. So, I can imagine how um, annoyed, I might be if somebody (who was not in the fishing business)

came into my office and started telling me how to do what I was already doing. Jesus was flat out meddling.

Sometimes when I read the Gospels, and I imagine the disciples as fishermen, the image my mind produces is a little more contemporary than it should be. I imagine Peter, with James and John, leisurely hanging out on their boats, talking about life and waiting on the nets to fill and then reeling them back in. So, I have to remind myself that when Jesus asks to get on the boat and go back out to sea, he's asking Peter, after a really bad night-shift at work, to get back on the boat and go back to work.

The job of a fisherman in the first century Galilee was less than leisurely. It was also not very much like the free-market fishing jobs that we know from our trips down to the coast. In the ancient world, there was a huge market for fish pulled from the sea. There was a sauce called garum that was made from the fish. *National Geographic* called it "the Ketchup of Ancient Rome" in an article published early last year. It was in such high demand that trade routes grew up along the paths from the fisheries to the plates of their ancient consumers.¹

Those who did the fishing were less notable than the product they offered the greater Roman economy. And this economy, remember, was a necessary piece of the Roman Empire. This is not 21st century democratic capitalism.

Scholars debate the social location of first century fisherman, but one thing that they agree on is that the three we meet in Luke's Gospel, along the shore of Gennesaret are a long way from the ruling class of Rome. They likely lived one day at a time, depending on the income gained from taking their fish to market.² Whether we want to think of them as middle-class managers, small business owners, or day laborers, these guys were living paycheck to paycheck.

While Jesus and Peter were already acquainted, Peter mainly knew Jesus as a teacher and healer. So, after Jesus gets done teaching from the boat, and starts giving fishing advice, I imagine that Peter, tired from a full night's work, was probably a little annoyed.

"Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Jesus says.

"Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." (Peter)

We know how the story goes, Peter lets down the net and the catch he pulls in is truly miraculous. There are so many fish the nets almost break. And then once the fish are

¹ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/archaeology-and-history/magazine/2018/01-02/what-is-garum-rome-fish-sauce/> retrieved 2.9.2019

² <http://www.kchanson.com/ARTICLES/fishing.html> retrieved, 2.8.2019

reeled in, their weight makes the boat start to sink. Peter signals the partners to come in their boat and help out because of the abundant catch.

For most workers, this would be a really good day on the job. The kind of day that gives hope for days ahead. The kind of day that motivates work. The kind of day that makes you want to get up the next day and do it again.

But if you keep reading along, Peter responds in a truly surprising way. Luke says he falls down at Jesus' knees and says:

“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

Jesus' response is both comforting and alarming:

“Do not be afraid: from now on you will be catching people.”

Luke continues:

When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

There is a very material aspect of this story. The fishermen have a hard day at work and Jesus turns it around. A few moments on the boat and Jesus turns extreme scarcity into over-abundance. And yet, the fishermen do not rejoice in their abundant catch, no, they pull it to shore and leave it all behind. ...Makes me think there must be more to this story.

Why would Peter, James, and John leave behind their necessary incomes and turn to follow Jesus?

And why would they do such a thing without any idea what might lie ahead?

Seems rather risky to me.

Have you ever thought you wanted something really badly, and then once you got it, you realized it wasn't all it's cracked up to be? Have you ever worked your whole life perusing financial stability or just trying to make it to retirement, looked back and realized the job is never going to truly satisfy?

I wonder if Peter had that kind of moment. That kind of realization when for once in his life he had too much return at work. Too much potential income and in that same moment he realized that too much just wasn't enough?

That's the only way I can make sense of the risk he takes that day on the shore.

I told you earlier that I am a real Charlottean and I don't like to take risks, especially financial risks. So, as I spent time with the scripture this week and tried to understand why Peter would make such a risky move, I decided to go and spend some time with other risk takers.

I met with Caralie Brown this week, who you all know is one of our founding members, and we talked a little bit about this scripture. She already knew everything I'd read in articles and commentaries but she had some incredible insights about why and how Peter, James, and John responded the way that they did.

As we got to talking she told me the stories about Greystone's beginnings. "We weren't unhappy at First Baptist," she remembered. "We weren't leaving because of some disagreement. We were completely happy and comfortable there. But the Raleigh Baptist Association reached out to First Baptist Church and said that there was a need in Northwest Raleigh. They felt strongly that we had more than enough resources and people to meet the need.

It reminded me of the way the fishermen probably felt after the miraculous catch. They had more than enough, and yet there was a calling to leave it all behind. There was a deep, inner, knowing that too many fish just weren't enough... it couldn't compare to this calling from Jesus, "Follow me."

Caralie's stories about making the decision to leave the comfort of First Baptist and venture out into this new part of Raleigh remind me that when we make the decision to follow Jesus, there can be fear. I asked her if she was ever afraid or worried and after thinking for a moment she responded, "No. But Dr. Lewis (First Baptist's Senior Minister at the time) was. He was afraid that when he extended the invitation to start the new mission at the end of service that Pentecost Sunday that half the congregation might get up and join the new thing. ... But they didn't. Only 17 of us in total on that day. And we became the founding members. Dr. Lewis told us that day that we were already a new church, because we were gathering, in Christ's name, and answering the call."

Follow me.

Two of the scariest words that a risk-averse person (like myself) can hear. Following implies a lack of control and an uncertainty about what lies ahead. If I know the way, I don't need to follow. But that's the nature of discipleship, we are perpetual followers, living our lives daring to say "yes" to God's invitation... "Follow me."

Just like the 17 founders who responded to the call on that Pentecost Sunday, Peter, James and John had no idea what saying yes to Jesus' invitation would entail. They could not know that it would consume their lives for the next three years, or that they would be leaving their jobs and families behind. They could not have known that the way they understood the world would be flipped upside down. But they would soon learn that in

the journey of following, their lives would be changed forever by the one thing they couldn't find anywhere else.

That is how God works in our lives. We think we know Jesus... the Galilean Jew who showed us the way to eternal life, the one who we find in Sunday School classes and on mission trips. The one who can heal and forgive all things. But too often we forget that this is the same Jesus who shows up in our daily lives, in our homes, in our social gatherings, in our workplaces... in those most inconvenient moments, calling us forward with those unwelcome and terrifying and risky words: "Follow me."

When we hear the call, as a church or as individuals, we cannot know all that will come, but we can lean on the lessons from our past that promise a future as full as Peter's fishing boat that day.

When Jesus calls us individually and as a church, we cannot know what the future will hold, and we will have to leave the comfort of the past behind. But we can have faith and move forward together knowing that the God who is calling us now is the God of Jesus who sat down to teach on Peter's boat. And it is the same God who spoke to the people of Israel through the prophet Isaiah saying:

"Do not remember the former things,
Or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing..."

Yes, our God is dynamic and alive and working in our world – bringing healing and love, abundance and forgiveness to all people who are open to taking a step of faith and who are willing to answer the call: "Follow me."

It is a risky venture – stepping out in faith. And it often impacts our real lives in ways that make us uncomfortable – taking a new job, speaking truth when it's easier to keep quiet, going out of our way to show love to a neighbor, and sometimes just releasing control and trusting God to provide a way.

But one thing I've learned is that even though I'd rather hold on to the comfort of the past, Even though I like to stay put and stick with what I know...

When God starts calling, a great adventure awaits, and there's no amount of familiar abundance that can make up for the joy of answering the call...

Sometimes too much just isn't enough when Jesus calls: "Follow Me."

Benediction

As you leave this holy place and
go back to your everyday lives

Go into the world,
listening and open to
God's holy interruptions

Go into the world, ready to say yes
to the call that often sounds
as simple as: follow me...

Go into the world, satisfied by the love of Christ,
Knowing that sometimes,
too much of anything else
Just isn't enough...

Go in peace, Amen.