

**“Claiming Our Christian Identity:
As the People of Faith”
Luke 5:1-11**

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Once upon a time, a tourist visiting the Great Smokey Mountains, walked too close to the edge of a cliff, slipped, and slid over the edge. Hanging over the mountainside, holding for dear life, he clutched a small branch from which he looked to the heavens above and down to a ravine below. In the midst of the emergency, he immediately started praying. “Dear God, You helped Daniel in the lions’ den. You saved Jonah from the belly of the whale. You rescued the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace, so dear Lord, in my hour of need, don’t let me die.” The prayer was hardly out of the tourist’s mouth, when a clap of thunder shook the place and a loud voice shouted, “Have faith in God, turn loose.” The man looked down into the deep ravine, then turned his face to the heavens and said, “Is there anybody else up there I can talk to?”

Faith! Never leave home without it. Faith is not a fairy tale; faith is a foundation for living. Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. By faith, you came to church today. By faith, you believe your car will start, your microwave will work, your Internet will connect, and your phone will function. By faith, you send your children out into a big world. By faith, you and I hope someday to make it to our heavenly home. It is to this active, productive, energizing, life-shaping faith that I call our attention to today.

Boy, do I have a fish story for you! Peter, James, and John have fished all night without a nibble. The crowds have gathered asking what crowds always ask a fisherman – not “Hello,” not “How are you?,” not “How are things going?,” – but they always want to know the same thing of every fisherman – “Catch anything?”

Jesus takes this moment and turns failure into faith, inviting would-be disciples to fish in places they have never dreamed of fishing. Before the story is over, the catch is so big that two boats nearly sink trying to get it to shore. Sounds like a typical fish story to me! Tucked into the middle of this story is an invitation to faith -- to real faith, to wonderful faith, to a kind of faith that will radically change your life and radically change the world. Will you think about this issue of faith in the midst of this story for a few moments today?

I have to begin by owning, as I'm sure you do, that there are things which destroy our faith. Some things batter our beliefs, limit our hopes in such ways that to pray at all, is hard. I call these things in life, **faith busters**. I bring a couple of them to our attention today.

At the top of the list for me is always, the fear of failure; that's a faith buster. It's going on in this story. "Master, we have fished all night and haven't caught a single thing." Imagine -- professional fisherman having to own up to being failures in the thing that they do the very best. Every person in this sanctuary has had a taste of failure. However you manage to rationalize it, failure is hard to swallow. It makes you want to bury yourself in a cave instead of present yourself to crowds.

The great preacher, George Buttrick, tells about preaching a sermon that fell as flat as a pancake one Sunday morning. There were no "Nice sermon" comments at the door. Finally, after a string of people had come through the line, a lady walked by and said, "Thank you, pastor, for your sermon." The great orator, Buttrick, replied, "I appreciate that, but it was too long." The smiling woman replied, "No, pastor, it just seemed too long."

Tom Landry, Chuck Noll, and Bill Walsh accounted for nine of the fifteen Super Bowl victories between 1974 and 1989. Do you know what else they had in common? They also established the worst first season records of head coaches in

NFL history. We've all tasted of failure.

Jean Bloomquist, writes in *Weavings*, "I got this invitation to my 20th high school reunion, so I went back and did what all of us have done in those moments. I pulled out my old high school yearbook and started flipping through it. Suddenly, I remembered that I was voted *The Most Likely To Succeed* in my high school class. The twenty years hadn't proven that to me. I was trying to make it as a free-lance writer and making such a small amount of money that I could barely pay the rent on my apartment. My first marriage to my high school sweetheart didn't work out well. In fact, we divorced and I was struggling through the pain of that divorce. So I asked myself, how on earth can I go back and face my high school classmates as the most likely to succeed when I feel like a total failure?"

Failure – it shoots you in the foot, wounds your hope, and leaves you so vulnerable that sometimes you're not sure that you're loveable. Failure tricks us into believing that God is absent and we're helpless and, even worse, that we might, in a twisted way, even deserve the kind of failure we're getting. "We fished all night and we didn't catch anything." Have you been there? Those are faith busters.

There is another thing that will kill your faith...just destroy it. It's to get into the same rut, the same routine and refuse to get out of it. It's here in this story, too. You know, the same old grind, refusing to change with changing times. It's comfortable there, but it is not faithful there. We need to know the difference.

Listen to this conversation, at least as I imagined it taking place. Jesus comes to Simon and says, "Now get out where it's deeper and let down your nets and I'll help you catch some fish." Now remember who's talking here. Here is Jesus, an ex-carpenter, trying to tell Peter, who is a professional fisherman, how to catch fish. I can hear it roaring in the echo of Peter's mind almost immediately. "Jesus, let me tell you something about fishing. The way you catch fish on the Sea of Galilee is, about dusk you push out your boat and get your friends

together, prepare your nets, and after it's turned dark, you troll along the shallow edges of the lake. When the fish come up in the cool of the night, you throw your net and catch them." Jesus listens to Peter's story and says, "Push out into the deep of the lake, in the middle of broad daylight, in the hottest part of the day, and I'll show you how to catch fish." Peter says, "Jesus, let me tell you how to catch fish. You go at nighttime and you go around the edge of the lake but, nevertheless, if You insist on it, ok, You've got it, I'll go, no matter what."

One of the most popular books on the market today in terms of management is entitled, *Who Moved My Cheese?*. It's the story of two little mice named Sniff and Scurry and two little creatures named Hem and Haw. Together they find this wonderful place to get cheese named, Station C. The problem arises when the cheese finally runs out. Sniff and Scurry go out to hunt for new cheese. Haw reluctantly re-adjusts and moves out to hunt for new cheese. Hem will have nothing to do with it. He is going to stay there, no matter what, even if it means starving to death. "This is where I belong, here in Station C, and that's where I'm going to be, no matter what." Have you ever been in Hem's corner? You understand what I'm saying. Most of us could try smarter instead of harder in life. Somebody says, "I've had some of my best plans laughed at. It's a good thing because God had something better in mind than what I came up with." Jesus said, "You have not because you ask not."

A boy and his father were walking along the road when they came across a big rock. The little kid looked up at his dad and said, "You think if I use all my strength, I could move this rock?" His father said, "I am absolutely sure that if you use all your strength, you can move this rock." So the boy pushed against it, shoved and exerted himself the best he could but the rock didn't budge. In discouragement, he turned back to his father and said, "You told me that if I used all my strength, I could move this rock." The father replied, "You haven't used all your strength yet. You haven't asked me to help at all. I'd be glad to help you move it if you would simply ask me." How many times in your life have you been up against some difficult thing and you tried to do it on your own because that's the way you've

always done it? Faith busters. We're living in the fear of failure and the ruts of routine. They will kill your faith every time.

On the other hand, there are **faith builders**. There are things that we can do in our life that will exercise our faith and stretch us into arenas of service and avenues of adventure that we never, ever dreamed possible. They are here in this story as well. Faith builders are two things -- just two things. **Trust and obey**. What did it take for a professional fisherman to trust an ex-carpenter? That's what's happening in this story. Are you able to trust the invitation of Jesus of Nazareth to live out your life in a faithful way? Do you trust God that much with your life?

Fred Buechner said he was driving down a road and he stopped by a roadside park. As he was sitting there trying to make a major decision in his life, he prayed, "God, give me some revelation, some inspiration about what I should do in this moment.' The sun was shining through the glass and I was praying and praying, again and again, that God would help me, when, believe it or not, down this deserted road, a car came by with a license plate on which was printed the single word: *TRUST*." Buechner said he suddenly looked up to God and said, "Thank you for the revelation.' It came to me in the moment of my greatest need." Do you trust God with your life? If you want to mount up on wings of eagles, you've got to be willing to leave the nest.

So Jesus says to Peter, "Push out into the deep waters and let your nets down for a catch." I ask you today, where are the deep waters in your life? Where are the unexplored places that God is nudging you into a new adventure? Let me put it this way – what would you do if you were not afraid of failure? Let me ask it another way – what new adventure is God calling you to undertake today? Discipleship is not, knowing where we're going and getting it all worked out. It's finding joy and contentment in knowing that I'm taking the trip, making the adventure, with God Himself. Do you trust God that much with your life? You see, prayer is not giving God instruction – "God, I

need you to do this, also this, and I'd be grateful if You get it all done before 5:00. I'd really appreciate it," then you go on with your life. Prayer is not that stuff at all. Prayer is showing up for service. Prayer is showing up saying, "God, what have you got in mind for me to do today?" Do you trust God that much with your life?

I love the circus. I can't wait for my grandson to get old enough so I have an excuse again to go to the circus. I love the sights and sounds and smells of the circus, but what I love most about the circus, are the trapeze artists. They're my favorite. They fly through the air with the greatest of ease, those daring young men on the flying trapeze. There is a secret to their success. You know what it is? The flyer must let go. The flyer's job is to get as still as possible and wait for the strong arms of the catcher to pull him from the air. If the flyer tries to catch himself, he'll fall every time. What a lesson for life!

The invitation, my friends, is to be able to trust yourself into the hands of God. It is to do what Kirkegard called, "Taking the leap of faith." It is not a foolish leap over a mountainside. It is a sure and certain leap to the hands of the almighty, loving God who is calling me to a new adventure. Have you ever been on that edge? It's an exciting moment! Do you trust God that much?

There are just two words to living in faith – one is **trust** and the other is **obey**. Peter had to make a decision, "Will I obey the Lord or not?" He knew how to fish. You fish around the shore. The Lord says go out into the deep. The question for you today is, "Will I or won't I go?" There's something about the call of God in our lives that always stretches us. It always seems to be too different or too much. Peter thinks he's learning a new way to fish, but guess what? He's not fishing for fish anymore at all. He's in a new school, taking a new course on how to fish for people.

Isn't this story amazing? Jesus convinces professional fishermen to go out and throw their nets in a place they are sure

there aren't any fish and they wind up catching so many that it even stretches a fish story! Here in their moment of success, in the height of their victory, when suddenly they can smile again around the crowds that are on the shore saying, "Look what we did last night." Jesus gives us a new command, "Give that stuff up. You don't have time to fish for fish anymore. I've come to call you to something new. Come on with Me. I'm going to teach you how to fish for people. I'm going to set you on a whole new adventure."

The powerfully amazing thing about this story is that they go! Did you get it? They actually go! I don't know what you do with that kind of stuff but I start asking questions. "What's the salary? What are the pension benefits? What does this mean to my family?" Peter was married – he had a family. What does this mean, this invitation of Jesus? The profound thing in this story that puzzles me to this day is verse 11. "And so they leave their nets and their boats and they follow." That's profound obedience! That's faith in action; indeed it is!

But I say to you today, the world's a better place because Peter didn't say, "I don't fish for people." The world's a better place because Michelangelo didn't say, "I don't do ceilings." Martin Luther didn't say, "I don't do doors." John Wesley didn't say, "I don't preach in the fields, don't send me out there." Noah didn't say, "I don't like arks and animals." Mary didn't say, "I don't believe in virgin births," and, finally, Jesus didn't say, "I don't do crosses." The world is a better place because of their faithful obedience.

They followed because they were called by God to go. Faith is the direction our feet begin to move when we hear the compelling invitation of God to a whole new life adventure. Push out into the deep and let down your nets for the catch. When He comes to call you, arise and follow fast. The way may lead through darkness, but it comes to light, at last. We are the people of faith; let's live like it. Amen.