

If You Say So

A sermon based on Luke 5:1-11

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As they used to say on the television show, Sesame Street, "This sermon is brought to you by the letter, 'F'".

1. Fish

It's a five-point sermon, with five F-words that I want the youth to remember, and the first of the five words is fish — and to help you remember I brought along a fish!

We've been reading the Gospel of Luke during the last month, following Jesus around Galilee, first to his hometown, Nazareth — not a nice story — and then as he spread his ministry throughout Galilee — a more encouraging story. In fact, in today's Gospel reading the crowds are so large and the foot traffic so congested that Jesus got into a boat to teach them!

Thus begins Luke's first fish story, about Jesus' first attempt to recruit some helpers, or disciples, as he called them. The boat Jesus got into belonged to a fisherman named Simon, and Simon took out the boat and steadied it while Jesus used it as a makeshift pulpit. So far the only thing fishy about this story is that Simon was a fisherman by trade, and when Jesus found him, Simon was busy washing and maintaining the nets he used for fishing. However, after speaking to the crowds, Jesus was ready to take a break, and he suggested that Simon take his boat out into deeper water and try some actual fishing. Simon had already been out all night, with no fish to show for his efforts, but he indulged Jesus, and wouldn't you know it, they caught so many fish that their nets were strained with the colossal weight of the fish, and they had to get help from their partners in the other boat. They filled both boats to overflowing, such that the boats threatened to sink! (Luke 5:4-7)

Well, you know the story. Everyone was "amazed" (Luke 5:9) at the enormous catch of fish, so much so that four of the fishermen signed up with Jesus that very day, for Jesus as much as said to them, "You think this is impressive? Come with me, and together we can do even more impressive things with people!" (5:10)

So that's where we get the first F-word — "fish," a small, slimy animal that may seem incidental to the point of the story, but Jesus' followers were so taken with it that it became embedded in Christian memory and imagination. In fact, among the symbols used by the early Christians, the fish probably ranks first in importance, its popularity among Christians due principally, it would seem, to an acrostic consisting of the initial letters of five Greek words that together form the Greek word for fish (Ichthys), five words — Jesus/Christ/Son-of/God/Saviour — five words that briefly but clearly describe the character of Christ and His claim to our worship. Thus the Greek word for fish became a profession of faith in Christ.

2. Fellowship

The second of the five words is fellowship. There are several indications in our fish story — our gospel story — that this new kind of fishing is a group thing. Obviously this new kind of fishing had to do with people — lots of people, judging by the jostling crowds (Luke 5:1), and Jesus needed Simon's help to address the crowds (5:3). Fishing itself was not a solitary endeavour; Simon talks about his partners (5:7) and about what "we" (5:5) have done and need (5:7) to do to deal with the large catch! And unlike many other passages in Scripture, where an encounter with God is a one-on-one event, in this gospel story Jesus walks away from the seaside with four helpers in tow! "They," says Luke — "...they ...brought their boats to shore, ...left everything and followed him." (5:11)

Set within the context of Luke's Gospel as it moves on into the Book of Acts, this passage is significant for Luke's unfolding theology of the church and the church's mission. In stressing the need for help with the large catch of fish, Luke presents the Christian vocation as one of mutual labour. The tremendous response to Jesus' ministry, and the sheer numbers of the crowds, required a team approach.

Luke's presentation of Simon in this fish story is intended to be exemplary of what a follower of Jesus is called to be and do. There is much work to be done. There are many "fish" to catch, many needs to address. The role of the church is to carry on the work of Jesus in proclaiming the Good News. And in Luke's sequel, the New Testament Book of Acts, we see the church doing exactly that, in some very unexpected places!

3. Focus

The third word is focus, and that's because that's what this fish story does for us — it helps us maintain our church's focus. Some wonderful parodies have been done on this gospel story. For example, there is the story of a fishing group that met week after week, month after month, and year after year, and talked about nothing but fishing. They talked about the abundance of fish available, and about different approaches to fishing. One year they came up with a concisely worded mission statement that carefully laid out the meaning of their fishing task. They defended fishing as an occupation, and declared fishing to be the primary task of those who fish! And it was a good thing to do, for there were many fish in the waters around them. And the fish were hungry!

This group was committed to fishing. They said, "The fishing industry exists by fishing as fire exists by burning." They sponsored fishing campaigns and world-wide conferences to discuss fishing and to promote fishing and to hear about the latest fishing equipment and whether any new bait had been discovered. Together with similar groups throughout the country they established large, elaborate, and expensive training centres where professors taught fishology, and offered courses on the needs of fish, on the nature of fish, where to find fish, and the psychological needs of fish. Some of the professors — who held doctorates in fishology from some eminently fishy institutions — were wonderful teachers, with deep insights into fishing. (Adapted from Darrell W. Robinson, *People Sharing Jesus*, 1995)

Well, there's much more to the parody, but you know where it's going — the group did everything but fish! Christians have long treated this gospel story, about fishing, as an image for mission. It's a simple story, and despite many attempts to complicate what Jesus lays out as an essentially very simple task, the image still beckons us — inviting us to invite others to discover the good news about Jesus! I don't care how you define

the good news, and each church tradition has its particular emphasis — proclamation, sacrament, service, community (Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*), justice — at the heart of what we're about is letting others in on the good news.

Now, some of us may think that evangelism is a dirty word, and that too much focus on this gospel fish story soon degenerates into a discussion of numbers! There's a wonderful article in a recent issue of "Christianity Today" that Janet Martin pointed out to me — an article that makes fun of evangelical Christians' fondness for numbers. Many times the author hears pastors say, "We're not about numbers, but after six months we have 800 to a thousand attending our worship service every week." (Andy Crouch, "Crunching the Numbers: A modest proposal for measuring what really matters in church," *Christianity Today*, December 4, 2000) He says that evangelicals have a wonderful way of letting you know that they're "not about numbers" while still letting you know exactly which numbers they are not about! One of the first things people ask me about our church is, "How big are we?"

A good poke at Christians who derive their models of evangelism from the numbers-driven world of business seems well deserved, for we know it's entirely possible to attract large numbers of people to something without it being even remotely or vaguely related to the kingdom of God!

On the other hand, one could also write parodies about fishing groups, who, like the first disciples, caught tons of fish, but who, unlike Simon and his fishing partners, were not amazed at the huge catch. This shyness about numbers would have seemed strange to Luke, whose history of the early church is punctuated with lots of numbers. Luke does not tell us a story entitled "The Feeding of the Crowd of Indeterminate Size". No! Five thousand (Luke 9:14) people were fed! Luke, in telling of the early church's growth, doesn't just let us know that the response to Peter's preaching was inconclusive but encouraging. No! He tells us that three thousand (Acts 2:41) people were added in one day!

If the arrival of God's kingdom is really a matter of "great joy for all people" (Luke 2:10), as the angel told the shepherds — who, by the way, counted their flocks several times a day — then the kingdom of God at some point or another has to involve some serious numbers. Ask Simon and his buddies, who worked all night and caught nothing, if numbers are unimportant! Ask their families, who went hungry if there was no catch. Ask the fishermen on Canada's East Coast if numbers are unimportant. Ask our sister church, the National Capital Community Church, if numbers are unimportant; they're meeting tonight to discuss their board's recommendation that they close down! After sixteen years we may once again be the only Mennonite church in town!

Rather than protesting that we're "not about numbers," let's start talking about all kinds of numbers (Crouch). Let's count not just the number of bodies we can get into our church, let's count the ways in which our church reflects the upside-down kingdom of God. Let's talk about diversity numbers, the extent to which our church crosses cultural and racial divides. Let's talk about giving numbers — oh sorry, some of you like to avoid those numbers too. Let's talk about the budget numbers; whether you like it or not, we'll be talking about those tonight, but just to make it interesting let's talk about the percentage of our budget we spend on causes that in no way directly benefit ourselves.

I said that the third of the five themes that come out of this gospel story is the word, focus, and I'm not suggesting changing it to figures, or numbers, but if our focus is on the

good news of Jesus' love and redemption for all humankind, then it shouldn't surprise us if our fishing nets are occasionally under a lot of strain.

4. Failure

The fourth word is failure, and that's what Simon felt like after a night of fishing with nothing to show for it (Luke 5:5). There are times when God will bless us with impressive results — thirty-fold, sixty-fold, a hundredfold (Matthew 13:23) — but there are also times when our nets remain empty. We resonate with Simon on this point, and in the biblical pantheon of heroes Simon is not alone. The Bible is quite familiar with failure; it speaks of friends who fail (Job 19:14), of families who fail (Job 19:14); it speaks, more personally, of failing flesh (Psalm 73:26), failing strength (Psalm 31:10), failing courage (2 Samuel 4:1). And in a most vivid image of failure the writer of Ecclesiastes writes of a grasshopper that drags itself along — a wonderful if depressing image of one designed to hop one's way through life being reduced to a centripetal crawl.

Not only does the Bible speak most vividly of feeling like a failure, it contains numerous biographies of failures. Think, for example of Jesus' dejected followers after his crucifixion. (Luke 24:21) When later the disciples gathered their wits, and their faith, and established the Church, they were not immune to either failure or feelings of failure, for faced with tremendous persecution, inadequate leadership, and false teaching in their midst, it was very difficult to feel like a successful church!

Even the normally upbeat Apostle Paul was not immune to failure and frustration. It is not accidental that he writes of earthen vessels prone to damage (2 Corinthians 4:7-10), and of the "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7f) that kept him humbler than he probably wanted to be.

The irony is that Jesus, despite his success in attracting crowds, failed in many ways. He failed with the rich young ruler. He failed in his own hometown. He failed with Judas Iscariot. He failed with the religious leadership, and with the vast majority of his fellow citizens. He failed with nine of the ten lepers. He failed with Pontius Pilate.

Perhaps failure is not the best word to describe Simon's reaction to the huge catch of fish, but he certainly had a deep sense of his own unworthiness. When Simon Peter saw the staggering catch of fish, he said, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8) Tom Sherwood made an interesting observation last Sunday when he noted that when we first hear the call of God we lean into it, but then quickly jerk back. One can see it in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah; his experience of God was an incredible experience (Isaiah 6:1-4), but in the face of it Isaiah jerked back and said, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips...." (6:5)

Our reading from the epistles reveals a similar movement of spirit. Paul talks about the "good news" (1 Corinthians 15:1) he is compelled to share, but admits, "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle...." (15:9) It's "by the grace of God (that) I am what I am...." (15:10)

Much more could be said about failure, but I want to move on to the fifth and final of the five themes that emerge from Luke's gospel story.

5. Faith

The fifth word is faith. Simon and his partners had worked all night long and caught nothing. And when someone who grew up in a carpentry shop suggested he try again, one can be excused for thinking that Simon would easily dismiss the suggestion. He was a plain-spoken man, and he was tired after a night of fishing. One might have expected a more strenuous objection from Simon, but there must have been something compelling and promising about Jesus and his suggestion, for Simon was prepared to try again based solely on the Jesus' word! "We've worked all night long (and) caught nothing," said Simon. "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." (Luke 5:5)

Simon's "If-you-say-so" response reveals a deep faith in Jesus, the disappointing results to this point notwithstanding. The text does not indicate why Simon responds as he does; it only portrays the willingness of Simon to take Jesus at his word.

In the mid-sixteenth century, when our own people were succeeding at both evangelism and martyrdom, a Jesuit by the name of St. Francis Xavier was enjoying a successful ministry in Japan. In less than a century there were half a million Catholics in Japan. The rate of conversion was abruptly interrupted, however, for a variety of reasons, and Japanese leaders set out to destroy Christianity. Great persecution followed, and the pressure and agony were so great that many who were not killed disavowed their Christian faith, and when the persecution ended the Christian faith was dead in Japan: every church destroyed, every missionary killed or exiled, every Catholic killed or forced into apostasy. Or so it was thought.

When, after two centuries of isolation Japan re-opened to foreign commerce — albeit only at a few ports, one of them Nagasaki — a church was erected in a walled compound there exclusively for Europeans. In 1865 a group of Japanese women shocked a Belgian priest by coming to the church, something forbidden by Japanese law. "We believe as you believe," they told him. "How did you know that it was safe to reveal your faith to me?" asked the priest. The women answered, "We were taught to look for three things: for priests who were celibate, who honoured Holy Mary, and who were obedient to the Holy Father of Rome. When we saw that you met these tests, we knew that you were the ones we had been told to wait for."

It was discovered that these women were not alone; there were some 30,000 underground Catholics in Japan. For almost two centuries they had persevered and kept the faith. This is faith, and the perseverance of faithfulness, on a grand scale! Many times these sisters and brothers in Japan must have persevered only because Jesus said so — because the good news of Jesus' love compels us to keep on keeping on, even in the face of daunting odds.

May we persevere as a church, through failure and success, knowing that the good news of Jesus' love and redemption is a pearl of exceeding value, and knowing that our efforts are a valuable contribution to God's purpose and kingdom. AMEN

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.