

Sermon Going Fishing
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February 6, 2022

Luke 5:1-11

Calls the First Disciples

Jesus

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while Jesus* was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³He 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. ⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' ⁵Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.' ⁶When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' ⁹For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰and 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.' ¹¹When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Sermon "Going Fishing"

When my brothers and I were young, my parents would take us to a lake on the Connecticut and Massachusetts border. There was a path down to a small beach with trees lining the path and bushes lining the beach. We would swim and play in the water. We would also bring slices of bread to feed the small fish that would come near us. They were called sunnys or pumpkin seeds, depending on who you asked. I'm sure you've seen them if you have been in Connecticut or Massachusetts lakes or ponds.

At one point, one of my brothers decided he wanted to go fishing. Now he was too young to need a license, so he didn't have to worry about that. And my dad had no interest in fishing but that didn't matter. My brother was determined and got his fishing pole with an actual reel on it.

Well, I remember him going down to the water with my other brothers to try out his new pole. He held the pole like he had seen fishermen do, brought the pole back and then brought it forward to cast the line out into the lake. But things don't always go as planned, not even fishing. That line didn't go forward. And when my brother looked back, the line had gotten caught in some branches. Who knew a fishing line could get so tangled. As you might have guessed, my brother caught no fish that day.

Well this morning we hear about Simon and his fellow fishermen. They didn't use poles and fishing line. They used nets, big nets that they threw over the sides of their boats to catch fish. And as our story begins, they had not had much better luck catching fish than my brother did that day. They had been out all night, in their boats with their nets in the water but had not caught any fish. We hear that they were on the beach cleaning their nets, preparing to head home.

But then Jesus appeared. He had developed quite a following. He had been teaching in the local synagogues. He had cast out a demon and healed Simon's mother in law. More and more people were coming to hear what he had to say.

On this particular day Jesus was on the shore of the lake and there were so many people that Jesus decided to preach from the lake, from a boat on the water. So Jesus asked Simon to let him preach from his boat. Jesus' words would flow over the water to the crowd upon the shore.

Now we know that when Jesus asked Simon to let him into his boat, Simon had been in his boat all night. He and his fellow fishermen were on the shore cleaning up. They cleaning their nets; ready to pack it in. Seasoned fishermen, they had a routine to follow before going home to get some sleep. They were done.

Surprisingly just a few words from Jesus prompted Simon to get back into his boat. And when Jesus had finished preaching, he had some other words for Simon, surprising words. Jesus told him to go back out into deep water and drop his net over the side of the boat.

Now Simon politely tried to explain to Jesus that putting the net over the side of the boat again would be useless. He knew that from experience. It was not going to work. He had just tried what Jesus recommended – to no avail. What Jesus wanted him to do was absurd. What would a carpenter's son and preacher know about fishing anyway? Simon doubted.

Simon is the typical disciple. He sometimes doubts. He is reluctant, at first. But then he follows through. When Simon did what Jesus told him to do, even though it seemed absurd, he was blessed with abundance. When Simon dropped his net as Jesus asked, lo and behold, the net filled with so many fish that it nearly sank two boats. It was amazing.

Jesus knew what he was saying. He knew what he was doing when he gave Simon instructions. He knew that the net would become full. All Simon had to do was believe – in Jesus and his words.

Jesus had been teaching the people when he went to the side of the lake. His ministry had started with teaching and healing. On that lake, in that boat, Jesus was teaching Simon, and us, about more than fishing. Jesus was teaching us about abundance – the abundance of God’s generosity and grace. But we first have to trust Jesus’ words.

And once Simon took Jesus’ words to heart, everything changed for him and his fellow fishermen. Not only did their nets fill with fish, but they heard Jesus’ call to become fishers of people. Jesus’ words and his actions were powerful.

Words are powerful. Words have power. They have the power to invite us into something greater than ourselves. Simon showed us that. Before he became a follower of Jesus, he was a successful fisherman. He spent a lot of time in a boat, on the water, catching fish. He probably did not spend a lot of time with people, especially large crowds of people. But once he decided to follow Jesus, all that changed.

Jesus’ words are life changing, making disciples out of simple fisherman who left their nets – their very full nets. Jesus’ words changed the disciples’ lives, forever. They changed the life of a simple fisherman, Simon, to the life of great leader of a new faith, Peter.

Jesus’ words change the lives of people who are ready to hear the Good News.

Jesus’ words have power. Peter’s words had power. Yes, and our words have power.

Words have the power to build up or tear down. They have power to transform lives and lift up others. But words also have power to hurt and destroy.

So I have two stories to share with you. They both demonstrate the power of words.

As a minister in the United Church of Christ, I am required to attend racial justice training on a regular basis. Well, one particular training program gave me a lot to think about. You see, the presenter shared an article that a young Black woman wrote. Her words were powerful, they captured the pain that words can inflict on individuals – the pain brought on by racism.

I will share just a few of her words, part of her life’s story. I invite you to listen to her words with your eyes closed and your heart open. She said,

When I was 5, my kindergarten classmate told me I couldn’t be the princess in the game we were playing because black girls couldn’t be princesses.

In fourth grade I was told by my crush that he didn’t like black girls.

In sixth grade a different crush told me that I was pretty – for a black girl.

In 7th grade my predominantly black suburban neighborhood was nicknamed “Spring Ghettos” instead of being called by its real name (Spring Meadows)

When I was in high school, I watched as the school resource officer didn’t let my brother into a football game after mistaking him for another black boy who was banned. And the officer maced my brother for insisting he was wrong.

When my husband leaves the house at night, I am afraid he’ll get killed for looking like somebody else.

When my nephew was 4, he told me he couldn’t be Spider man because Spider Man is white.

The author shared many more words, words that conveyed the pain she has experienced; words that conveyed the racism that had impacted her life. Her words caused me pain. If my daughter, or son, or nephew had shared those words, those stories with me, my heart would have ached for them. I would have wanted to do something.

While she is not my daughter, I still want to do something. I am trying to educate myself by reading books and attending other programs. I am learning about the problem of racism and about things I can do in my personal life so that I can do something positive and make a difference. And I can share what I learn with others.

But sometimes, our words don’t require a lot of learning or reading or programs. Sometimes they simply require a compassionate heart. Which brings me to my second story. This one is about Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who wrote letters and shared powerful words, including words from scripture. But the words I want to share with you are not from one of his speeches.

The words I want to share with you are words that gave him comfort and meant a lot to him. The story is about the time he had been stabbed at a book signing. The blade of the knife had gone through his chest and the tip of it was resting against his aorta, the main artery of his heart. If the blade pierced his aorta, it would have been fatal. In reporting on the incident, the New York Times wrote that if he had sneezed, he would have died. Well, he recovered from his surgery.

As you might imagine, he received lots of letters after his surgery. Some were from important people – like the Governor of New York, the Vice- President and even the President. But Rev. King said that the one he would never forget was from a young high school student. It read, “Dear Dr. King: I am a ninth-grade student at the White Plains High School. While it shouldn’t matter, I would like to mention that I am a white girl. I read in the paper of your misfortune,

and of your suffering. And I read that if you had sneezed, you would have died. And I'm simply writing to you to say that I'm so happy that you didn't sneeze."¹

Words are powerful. They can cause pain or bring healing. They can convey another's story. They can make us think. They can educate. They can lift up and bring hope.

Jesus called Simon and his friends to become fishers of people, to share the good news of Jesus – news of a new way, a different way; a way of love, forgiveness, healing, abundance – like a net so full of fish that it nearly sank two boats. Jesus shared this new way with words in stories that offered a radical message, words that taught and words that healed.

Words have power. Words can turn the world upside down. Jesus words offer us insights and a path into a world of justice, of peace, of love, and of hope. As followers of Jesus, we are called to hear the words and stories of Jesus. We are also called to hear the words and stories of our neighbors. We are called to hear those words, to hear their relevance, to take those words to heart, and to learn from them.

And we are called to share Jesus' words to support, to heal, and to bring hope to our brothers and sisters, to all God's children. That's how we become fishers of people. Jesus is telling us to cast our nets out into the waters, for he is with us in our boats.

So, let us consider how we are fishers of people. Let us consider our words. Do they humiliate or empower? What words do we share that offer compassion and healing? What words do we need to hear to better understand the struggles of others? What words can we share to lift their burdens?

And may these words from Psalm 19 guide us, "Let the words of my mouth and the mediation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."

¹ I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World. James M. Washington, editor. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992. p. 201-202