

Discipleship: Into the Deep
A Sermon Based on Luke 5:1-11
Rev. Kathryn Kreutzer
February 9th, 2025

Our scripture today tells a familiar story - the calling of the first disciples. We hear some version of the “call story” in all four gospels. Today, we’ll hear from Luke, which parallels Matthew and Mark, but is much longer. Their versions have about 5 sentences, but in the book of Luke, there is A LOT more going on, and it is about A LOT more than calling disciples.

Hear these words from Luke 5:1-11.

5:1 Once while Jesus was standing beside the Lake of Gennesaret and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, 5:2 he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gotten out of them and were washing their nets. 5:3 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.

5:4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." 5:5 Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

5:6 When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to burst. 5:7 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.

5:8 But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus's knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" 5:9 For he and all who were with him were astounded at the catch of fish that they had taken, 5:10 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who are partners with Simon.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." 5:11 When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed Jesus.

This reading is from the 5th chapter of Luke, but the ministry of Jesus didn't begin until the fourth chapter. It's early in his story and up to this point, he's been working alone – a solitary itinerant preacher and healer wandering the Galilean countryside. But today's story lets us know that he needs helpers, and he calls his first disciples. I suspect that most of us have heard this story of discipleship as interpreted through the lens of evangelism and missionary work – as a story of fishing for people, to bring them into an exclusive Christian fold. Unfortunately, that mission has often been undertaken by the Church (Church with a big-C) without regard for the background or values of their subjects. So for today, let's set aside the traditional notion of "fishing for people" and instead explore a deeper meaning of this discipleship passage.

In my study to prepare this sermon, I learned that those listening to Jesus would have understood the expression “fishers of men” quite differently than we have. The phrase “fishing for men” was carefully chosen by Jesus for how his listeners would have known it; it references passages from the ancient scriptures they would have known. Here are a few examples:

From Jeremiah 16:16 – Through the prophet, Yahweh says, *“I am sending enemies who will catch you like fish and hunt you down like wild animals.”*

Jeremiah shared these words with corrupt Israelites in response to their idolatry, their disregard for the laws of the Torah, and for the rampant social injustices happening in their communities.

From Ezekial 29:4 - Speaking through the priest, Yahweh refers to Egypt’s leader as a sea-serpent, and he says to pharaoh, *“I will put a hook in your jaw and pull you out of the water.”*

And from Amos 4:2 – The Lord again condemns the people of Israel, specifically for their mistreatment and abuse of the poor and needy. He tells them they will all be taken away by sharp fishing hooks.

To Simon, Andrew, James, and John, the metaphor of “fishing for men” would have been about “hooking or catching a powerful and unjust person, and removing them from the position of power from where they were wielding harm. This wasn’t about saving souls so they could enjoy postmortem bliss, but about changing systemic injustice in the here and now.” (Herb Montgomery, Fishing for People, Patheos.com, 02.04.2025,

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2025/02/fishing-people/>).

Diana Butler Bass says this in her post titled “Angling for Justice”:

“There was no such thing as a free enterprise fishing business and there were no fishing entrepreneurs. Fishing was controlled by the Roman state – and profited only the elite... The best and biggest fish would be shipped off to Rome for the tables of the wealthy. Fisherfolk would get no profit from it since Ceasar functionally owned the lake and all the creatures in it... After Rome took its portion, some middling fish might be sold at regional or local markets, but those fish would be heavily taxed in a system of tariffs, duties, and tributes, and those who caught the fish would see little from their sale... You, your parents and children, and your neighbors and friends were part of a massive political and economic hierarchy which took nearly all the work of your hands and gave it to the wealthiest people in the empire... They [the fishermen] resented imperial control of their homeland and its lakes and waters. They swam in a sea of injustice.”

Once Simon and his fellow fisherman saw what Jesus was offering them, it’s no wonder they were leaping out of the water to fish for men – or to remove corrupt overlords from power. But first, he had to be willing to go deep.

In the story, Jesus doesn’t call for Simon to stay in the shallow waters of the shoreline. There is a way of being a disciple that is shallow. Shallow discipleship is what Bishop Budde was referring to in her sermon on inauguration day at the National Cathedral when she said, “God is not impressed by our prayers when actions are not informed by them.” Shallow

discipleship is where faith is measured only by adherence to doctrine, participation in rituals, or prayers and other outward expressions of belief that are not accompanied by inner commitment. I am NOT saying that church doctrine, rituals, prayers, (or anything else) is shallow. I am saying that deep discipleship requires more. We can talk about love without acting in ways that show love; we can speak about justice without making any changes to our privileged ways of life – or taking any risks, we can pray for peace while we doing nothing about the turbulence in the world around us, and we can make mistakes without reflecting on them and making appropriate amends. These are examples of shallow discipleship.

It's easy to stay in the shallows where the water is much safer. But in our scripture, Jesus calls Simon into deep discipleship. And to go deeper means engaging in ways that stretch us, challenge us, and ultimately transform us.

I have my own story to share about splashing around in shallow waters. Pastor Jonathan and I chaperoned a Sardis youth mission trip back in August of 2013, when Dylan and Kaleb, my two oldest kids, now 27 and 24, were in our youth group. It's been enough years since, that a lot of memories from the trip have faded, but there are a few things that I can recollect vividly. The trip was to Washington DC and the mission for our group of about ten was to help with childcare at an inner-city apartment complex located about a mile and half from Calvary Baptist Church in Chinatown, whose floors we were

sleeping on. And I do remember the floors quite well because I spent many waking hours laying on them.

Another clear memory is walking into the common area of the apartment complex on our first day and noticing how visibly filthy it was. I did not want to touch anything – not the grimy toys, not the dingy books, and I surely did not want to get down on the scummy floor to play with snotty kids. The floor was littered with dirt, crumbs, dead bugs, and God only knows what else. BUT I grinned and bore it through the first day – and that’s all it took. After that, I was in love with those little kids, who were so happy to have our love and attention. Even more than the little ones, I loved seeing how OUR big kids were engaging with them.

There were only two women working to care for all the children, so they welcomed our help with open arms. Both of them lived in the complex and I cannot imagine that they were well paid for the hard work they did. I fell in love with the teachers too. They were truly dedicated to the well-being of the children in their charge.

During the week, I learned that the place was filthy, not because the teachers didn’t care, but because there weren’t any resources for cleaning. The only cleaning was done by the two of them – and their hands were full meeting the needs of the children. The only cleaning supplies were old rags

and water. They DID NOT EVEN OWN a vacuum cleaner. I hope you can hear the indignancy in my voice – because that’s how I felt!

So, what did we do? This was a Baptist mission camp after all, so all our kids had come prepared to make a mission offering, which we collected and promptly took to the nearest Wal-Mart and used to purchase the nicest possible vacuum cleaner we could with what money we had.

At first glance, that may not look like a shallow decision. After all, my grandmother used to say, “Cleanliness is next to Godliness.” That proverb was coined by John Wesley in a sermon more than 200 years ago, and it’s still said today. But saying something over and over and doesn’t make it true – it just often makes people believe it’s true! If you, like me at the time, think the vacuum cleaner was a good purchase, then you just might be splashing around the shallows a bit too. Most of us cannot really identify with what poverty feels like. From what I’ve since learned, tidy floors are not a priority when you cannot afford food for your family, medicine for a child, diapers for your newborn, or childcare so you can try and make ends meet. Clean floors are a luxury that we take for granted.

The teachers did appreciate the vacuum. And I’m sure it got plenty of use - at least until a filter needed to be replaced or a hose broke, and there

was no money to repair it. But I don't think the vacuum cleaner made one iota of a difference in the lives of those kids.

It wasn't until after I got back home and was reflecting on the trip that I realized what a shallow purchase it was – and it has haunted me ever since! It was a purchase that made ME feel better. It was a reflection of what I wanted and what I valued. But it was not a reflection of the background, the values, or the needs of the community I'd gone to serve. I was trying to be a disciple, but I didn't cast my net in the deep waters. I'm not honestly sure what the best use of our mission collection would have been. I suspect the preschool could have used it for diapers for the toddlers who showed up without any, or food for the kids who came without lunch. But the best option would have been to engage in dialogue with the teachers about what the needs actually were instead of assuming I knew.

Jesus told Simon to cast out into deeper waters, and he protested at first, but then he relented and said, "If you say so, I will let down the nets." His net didn't burst with abundance until he was willing to let go of his shallow desires and go deep. When Jesus told Simon, "From now on, you will be fishing for people," he wasn't simply talking about recruitment. He was talking about transformation, both within ourselves and in the world. To "catch" people is to listen for true understanding – and respond appropriately; it's to offer radical hospitality; it's to work towards justice for everyone in our world

(whether you like them or not); it's to create spaces of belonging, and it's to embody God's love so deeply that others are drawn into our nets.

I don't know what our youth learned on that mission trip, but I certainly learned an important lesson. And regardless of our decision to spend our collection on a vacuum, our trip WAS successful. Maybe the chaperones weren't casting in deep waters, but the youth were. There's a picture on the back of today's worship guide, and it says more about the mission than I could in ten thousand words. Like our youth group, may we all cast our nets in deep waters.

Holy One,

Help us hear Jesus' call anew, "Put out into the deep." Let us leave behind the safety of shallow discipleship and go deeper into our commitment to following his ways of peace, justice, and love of our neighbors, remembering that even those we don't want to claim, are our neighbors. May we trust that when we do, our nets will be filled beyond measure.

Amen.