

A Fish Story

Luke 5:1-11

I am not a fisherman. I don't know much about fish, or their habits, or the difference between fly fishing and, well, whatever the other kind of fishing is called. But I have heard my fair share of fish stories over the years and I know that they are usually about the big one that got away, or in my father-in-law's case, the huge one that he claims he caught off a bridge in downtown Gatlinburg, except that he didn't take pictures, so we are left with no other choice than to take his word for it.

This is a different kind of fish story, obviously.

It is also not, despite how it looks, a typical 'call' story. Jesus never actually tells Peter to follow him; he never comes right out and says he's got a job for him to do. There's no charge, no invitation. But you've probably noticed that I like to categorize stories, find it helpful to tell you right up front what kind of story it is that we are dealing with. So, we will call this a fish story, and it is a story about how, in Peter's eyes, Jesus went from being 'master,' to 'Lord.'

It is hard to imagine that this is Peter's first encounter with Jesus, and in fact, if we backtrack just a bit we learn that Jesus has actually been in Peter's house in Capernaum, where he healed his mother-in-law, and then a large crowd of others as word about him made its way through town. And since Luke writes that Jesus left the synagogue and went to Peter's house we can even assume that Peter heard him preach in his home synagogue, and had seen him cast out a demon. It's easy to envision Peter taking Jesus aside and asking him to come to his house and take a look at his wife's mother.

So when the crowd backed Jesus up to the water's edge one day, it almost certainly wasn't a complete stranger who bailed him out. Peter and his partners had just come in from a long and fruitless night of fishing – not recreational fishing, mind you, but the kind that kept food on their tables and a roof over their heads – but not if they continued to have nights like that one. Trapped between the lake and the multitude, Jesus asked if Peter might take him just a little ways away from the shore, give him just a little distance between him and his audience so they could see and hear him better, so while Jesus used his boat as a pulpit, Peter sat there and continued to clean and repair his nets and wind up his work day. It was an easy thing to do.

Knowing Peter, Luke probably edited his reaction a bit when Jesus finished teaching and told him to row on out where it was deep – again – and cast his nets into the water just one more time. They were exhausted, frustrated, probably worried about the loss of income, ready to leave their empty boats and go home to sleep, and a carpenter – a land-lubber – is trying to tell them how to do their job. These were not little dinghies, and the Sea of Gennesaret is no small pond. This was about a 26-foot-long boat Jesus was asking them to take back out into the middle of a huge lake, get their clean nets all dirty and tangled again for just one more, probably futile cast. And yes, Peter protests.

But he does it. He agrees – 'Master (or teacher) if you say so, I will do it.' Peter lets him know just how unreasonable the whole idea is, but he obeys.

One of the things I keep coming back to about this next part of the story is the fact that the catch they hauled in wasn't just a normal-sized catch. It was huge, so outrageously huge that it threatened to destroy their nets and sink their boats. It makes me think of the unbelievable amount of wine Jesus made at the wedding at Cana, or the twelve baskets of food left over after 5,000 people had eaten their fill of bread and fish. Jesus wasn't just compensating for their lack of wine, or their supper-less stomachs, or their luckless night on the lake. He was making a point. And Peter got it, right off the bat.

'Get away from me, Lord!' He understood, finally, that he wasn't merely in the presence of some gifted teacher, or practitioner of the healing arts, or a charismatic leader and motivational speaker. He was in the presence of the Holy One. Someone he was not worthy to be in the presence of, much less in same boat with, out in the deep.

'True,' Jesus says, 'but stay with me anyway. You don't need to be afraid.'

According to my Bible, and maybe yours, this story is about the calling of Jesus' first disciples. And that may have been the outcome, that Jesus left that day with not only Peter, but also James and John, but I think it's about much more than that. It's an invitation to go deeper.

This story suggests that there are two kinds of disciples. The first are shallow-water disciples, the ones who are content to let Jesus sit in the boat with them while they do their own thing. Jesus doesn't bother them much, doesn't ask much of them, doesn't change their lives much. They're perfectly happy where they are, just sitting and listening to his teaching, learning, being inspired while their boat gently rocks back and forth at the waters edge where it's safe. And why wouldn't they be? They can get out anytime they want, anytime he asks too much, or teaches something that's not to their liking.

But then there are the disciples who have taken Jesus up on his invitation to go deeper, despite all the good reasons there are not to. They are the ones who leave the safe, sandy shoreline where their life is still in their own hands, where they aren't too committed, and row out into the middle of it, to the place of uncertainty and risk.

And that's where they encounter Jesus, not just the engaging teacher Jesus, the inspiring Jesus, but the Holy One. Out in the deep is where they see with absolute clarity, Jesus in all his power and glory, and themselves and their failures and unfulfilling lives. And they are never the same. I can't tell you how it happens, how it might happen for you. You might get fish, an overwhelming abundance of them, maybe it will be someone else's "fish" story, maybe you will encounter God in a whole new way sometime when you are stranded out in the deep, in way over your head.

I recently read an article by a woman who experienced what others might call a mid-life crisis, but what she eventually came to call a 'third conversion.'* The first two, earlier conversions brought her to initial faith, and then later to a piercing sense of clarity about the ways she had been living her life. Truthfully, though, neither conversion had any great impact on her life. She

believed, and she cleaned up her act. But not much about her life changed. It was still her own; Jesus was just incorporated into it.

And then came this third conversion. She wrote that it took her ‘beyond revelation and repentance and into the area of calling...[it was]a deepening of faith that results in radical new action.’ She had a changed life and purpose. A complete giving over of herself to God and God’s work. She no longer wanted to do her own thing while Jesus sat nearby, preaching what she had always thought to be impossible, idealistic ways of living. Suddenly, her own schedule and plans and priorities lost their command over her. She was no longer interested in being captain of her own ship, master of her own destiny. The safety and security of the shore no longer appealed to her, compared to the life of adventure and risk and absolute devotion that God promised. She was ready, finally, to live the deeper life of discipleship and service that God had always called her to live.

Peter had no idea what was in store for him, where being with Jesus would take him. It wasn’t a calculated risk he took. But out there in the middle of the lake, in the deep, he encountered Jesus and his true self, and he knew that being with this man, wherever he went, whatever he asked, was more important than anything else in his life. More important than his work, his boats and nets, more important than all those fish he had just hauled in. More important, even, than his family. He was ready to walk away from it all and follow Jesus.

This story asks that same question of us: are we ready to go from calling Jesus ‘teacher’ to ‘Lord?’ To leave the shallow waters and go deep?

* Wake-up Call, by Paula Huston, Christian Century, January ‘10