

McCabe United Methodist Church

What Are We Willing to Leave Behind?

Sermon on Scripture Luke 5:1-11 (1/30 & 1/31/16)

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“Jesus was standing on the shore of Lake Gennesaret, teaching the people as they crowded around him to hear God’s message. Near the shore he saw two boats left there by some fishermen who had gone to wash their nets. Jesus got into the boat that belonged to Simon and asked him to row it out a little way from the shore. Then Jesus sat down in the boat to teach the crowd.

When Jesus had finished speaking, he told Simon, 'Row the boat out into the deep water and let your nets down to catch some fish.' 'Master,' Simon answered, 'we have worked hard all night long and have not caught a thing. But if you tell me to, I will let the nets down.'

“They did it and caught so many fish that their nets began ripping apart.

“Then they signaled for their partners in the other boat to come and help them. The men came, and together they filled the two boats so full that they both began to sink.

“When Simon Peter saw this happen, he knelt down in front of Jesus and said, 'Lord, don't come near me! I am a sinner.' Peter and everyone with him were completely surprised at all the fish they had caught. His partners James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were surprised too. Jesus told Simon, 'Don't be afraid! From now on you will bring in people instead of fish.' The men pulled their boats up on the shore. Then they left everything and went with Jesus.”

“The men pulled their boats up on the shore. Then they left everything and went with Jesus.”

At a preaching conference I attended several years ago, one of the presenters – a professor at a United Methodist seminary in Atlanta – said this: “When I listen to a sermon, I want to know **that** the Scripture *did something* to the preacher.

“I want to know how it affected you, how it challenged you, how it continues to gnaw at you. I want to know what the Scripture reading *did* to you.”¹ That piece of advice comes back to me, time and time again, as I prepare sermons week after week.

“When I listen to a sermon, I want to know what the Scripture reading did to the preacher.”

Well...do you want to know what today's Scripture reading *does* to this preacher? It makes me feel inadequate as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

First and foremost, *that* is what this reading does to me: it makes me feel inadequate. And, I don't know about you all, but I don't enjoy feeling inadequate.

As a human being in this culture, I feel inadequate about plenty of things much of the time as it is – my weight, my looks, my skills and abilities, my professional success as compared to my peers, etc...and I suspect I am not alone in these very kinds of feelings.

We live in a culture of comparisons, of “keeping up with the Joneses” – however you interpret that for yourself. Many of us don't need help finding ways to feel inadequate. So I don't love it when I encounter sections of God's holy Word that cause me to feel that way. But Luke chapter 5, verses 1-11, is one such section of God's holy Word.

“Jesus told Simon, 'Don't be afraid! From now on you will bring in people instead of fish.' The men pulled their boats up on the shore. Then they left everything and went with Jesus.”

They left *everything* in order to go with Jesus.

I haven't done that. I have plenty of stuff – physical, emotional, and spiritual – that continues to go with me as I journey down my own path of

¹ Summary quote of something Rev. Dr. Anna Carter Florence said at The Celebration of Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary in the fall of 2010.

discipleship...some of that stuff is helpful to me on my journey, while much of it is not.

I have most definitely *not* left everything in order to go with Jesus. And so this passage of Scripture inspires in me feelings of inadequacy.

Well, at least the last line of it does, anyway. The rest of the story is actually quite inspiring. And, in fact, that fateful last line – the line about Simon Peter, James, and John leaving everything in order to follow Jesus – that line doesn't make any sense unless you've paid close attention to the story that precedes it.

I was away from the pulpit the last two weekends and, as I prepared to write *this* sermon, I listened to the two sermons that were preached in my absence – and I was so grateful I took the time to listen to them! They were inspiring messages that left me feeling blessed by God's love and challenged to deepen my response to that love.

Two weekends ago, one of our lay members, Chris Chase, preached on Jesus' parable of “the pearl of great price” – the story Jesus told in the Gospel of Matthew about how God's kingdom is like a merchant who found one pearl, sold everything he owned, and bought that one pearl. In his message on these verses, Chris shared how God is like the merchant and Jesus like the pearl:

in order to bring ultimate love and salvation to the world, God gave us Jesus – to teach us, to offer ultimate sacrifice, and to be resurrected that we might have eternal hope. Jesus is God's “pearl of great price”...and God gave us Jesus because we, too, are pearls of great price – worthy of God's love, worthy of salvation, and of utmost value to God. What a powerful, powerful reminder.

Then, last weekend, our District Superintendent, Rev. Keith Nelson, preached a sermon on Luke 4:14-21. In that passage, Jesus shares his “mission statement” with those in his home synagogue in Nazareth – a mission statement based on words from the prophet Isaiah...words about a Messiah who would come to bring healing to our broken world.

In his sermon on this passage, Keith challenged us with the reminder that all who claim to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior have signed-onto this same mission – this mission of bringing healing to our broken world. That's why we Christians are here on earth: to respond to God's loving, merciful work by offering love and mercy to others.

I so appreciated both of those sermons as I listened to them this past week: I appreciated their messages *generally*...but I also appreciated the way each of them served to prepare the way for today's Scripture reading and sermon. I listened to Chris's and Keith's sermons and found myself thinking how perfect *their* words were in relation to Luke 5 and in relation to the sermon God was working on in me for this weekend.

See, the message of Luke 5:1-11 – the message of leaving everything in order to follow Jesus – doesn't make sense if we don't already understand what both Chris and Keith shared here at McCabe these last two weekends.

The message of leaving everything in order to follow Jesus only makes sense if we understand two very important things: first, that we are each of us deeply loved and of utmost value to God...and, second, being deeply loved by God should inspire us to join Jesus' mission of healing our broken world. That's what discipleship is all about. It's what today's reading from Luke chapter 5 is all about.

So, back to the story in today's reading: Simon Peter, as well as James and John, had surely heard about Jesus. News about Jesus' teachings and healings had spread through the region and so, when he arrived at Lake Gennesaret that day to teach, he must have been somewhat familiar to the fishermen – at least in name and by reputation.

A crowd had gathered, so Jesus did some teaching from one of their fishing boats. Then, after he was done teaching, he told Simon Peter to row his boat out into deep water and to let his nets into the water in order to catch some fish.

In that moment, I imagine Simon breathed a deep sigh, and inwardly rolled his eyes at Jesus, the carpenter-teacher who was suddenly telling him how

to do his job. “Master,” Simon said to Jesus, “we worked that water all night and caught nothing. But...okay. I'll give it one more shot.”

Perhaps Simon Peter was simply being courteous...obliging Jesus when he followed Jesus' request and cast his nets once more into the deep water. Or...perhaps he had heard something when Jesus was teaching – perhaps his mind and heart had been opened to the possibility of something incredible.

Simon Peter was exhausted from a night of unsuccessful fishing. And don't many of us understand that kind of exhaustion – the exhaustion of feeling like you've done everything you should be doing, but just aren't getting the results you want and need?

Simon Peter was exhausted...but he allowed himself to be open to the possibility that Jesus had something incredible in store for him. And Jesus did, in fact, have something incredible in store for him:

Because it wasn't very long before there were so many fish in his net that Peter couldn't handle it on his own. He had to call his partners, James and John, to come out and help. In the end, there were so many fish that both fishing boats began to sink under the weight...and all that after a night during which they had caught *nothing*.

Has Jesus ever worked a miracle like that in your life?

Jesus had taken their exhaustion and had transformed it into something incredible and abundant. As the fish kept coming in, all three men – Simon Peter, James, and John – were drawn to Jesus in a life-altering sort of way.

And, when Jesus told them that, from then on, they'd be bringing in people instead of fish, they left everything to follow him. Can you imagine?

They had just had what was surely the best catch of their entire careers...and they promptly left it all behind in order to follow Jesus. They left behind what was familiar – the career they knew and the families they surely held dear – they left it all behind in order to go with Jesus.

Because Jesus called *them* . He wanted *them*. He'd made a miracle happen for them and they were deeply grateful. Shouldn't we all be so inspired by the miracles Jesus works in our own lives...those miracles – big and small – wherein we just know God showed-up for us?

“The men pulled their boats up on the shore. Then they left everything and went with Jesus.”

It's true that the last line of this Scripture reading causes me to feel inadequate as a disciple of Jesus...but the story that precedes the last line inspires me and gives me hope.

It gives me hope because I know God has worked unique miracles in my life, too – miracles that have inspired, and continue to inspire, me to grow in my own discipleship.

This past fall, our Leadership Team and I began conversations with our district superintendent about McCabe receiving an appointment for a full-time Discipleship Pastor. The process leading up to these conversations has been a bit long and convoluted, so I'm not going to take the time to get into that now.

For now, it's simply important for all of us to be aware of – and to be praying for – this new pastor who will be joining us at McCabe this summer. (We are hoping to be ready to confirm and to announce who it will be within the next month, or so.)

Though McCabe has, in the past, had an associate pastor who worked alongside of and in support of the Senior Pastor, our Discipleship Pastor will function quite a bit differently than previous associate pastors.

A small portion of our Discipleship Pastor's time will be spent in “normal,” day-to-day pastoral work like worship planning, preaching, and the occasional wedding, funeral, or hospital visit. That said, however, the vast majority of their time will be spent in helping us grow in our discipleship – as individuals and as a congregation.

Our first-ever McCabe Discipleship Pastor will work hard to help us be very intentional about how we *connect* people of all ages with Jesus Christ...how we help people of all ages grow in their *relationship with* Jesus...and how we help people of all ages *better serve* to join in Jesus' mission of healing our broken world.

At McCabe, we already do much to fulfill these very things. But, having a full-time, pastoral staff member leading this significant area of ministry will help us do all of it more faithfully and with much more intentionality.

It's very exciting to think about all the ways in which this new pastor will help us grow in our discipleship. But it's also a bit scary...because growing in our discipleship is always about leaving behind many things we hold dear in order to more faithfully follow our Lord and Savior.

Many of you are aware that, two weeks ago, I began a new chapter in life as I married my beloved, Derrick Orr, here in McCabe's sanctuary. Those of you who are – or who have been – married truly understand what a significant shift it is when you move from singleness into marriage. I am just beginning to understand it myself!

Marriage is about making room for someone else in your life and world. It's about understanding that *your way* isn't always the *best way* for your household.

Marriage is learning what pieces of yourself and your single life are worth keeping and what needs to be left behind in order to grow into something new, *together*. At a purely logistical level, Derrick and I have had to sort through the *stuff* needing to be left behind in order to make room for each other in our home.

In the weeks leading up to our wedding, as I prepared to welcome another human being – and his things – into the parsonage, I made several trips through my cupboards, bookshelves, and closets, discerning what I wanted to keep and what needed to go. Many cars-full of things got donated to various non-profit centers in Bismarck. And many more are likely yet to be donated!

But making room for a spouse is so much more than making *space* in a home (as important as that is). Among other things, for me, it's also about learning how to accept someone else's sleep and work schedules...it's about opening my heart to new people – friends and family...it's about sacrificing much of my blessed “me time” in favor of “us time”...it's about realizing I don't always get what I want for dinner.

Each of these things represents a “leaving behind” of sorts: leaving behind pieces of a life that was primarily about me – what I wanted to do, when I wanted to do it...and it could all feel like miserable sacrifice if I didn't wholeheartedly love the person with whom I'm now sharing this life – and if I didn't trust that he wholeheartedly loves me.

In a similar way, the same is true when it comes to our own discipleship – when it comes to our path of following Jesus. We make sacrifices of time, energy, money... we leave behind hurts and judgments that hold us back from growing in our love of God.

In order to grow in our love of God and in our faithfulness to Jesus Christ, we leave all sorts of things behind...and it's not always easy or simple.

The good news of today's reading is that our Lord and Savior works miracles of abundance in our lives – miracles of God showing up when we most needed it.

Those miracles may not look exactly like two boats-full of fish after a night of nothing... but they are miracles all the same.

The *challenge* of this good news is that responding to it requires us to leave behind that which holds us back – that which holds us back from following Jesus more closely, more fully.

Perhaps you need to leave behind activities or purchases that would free up resources so you can be more generous with money and service.

Perhaps you need to leave behind judgmental attitudes about who does and does not deserve God's mercy and love.

Perhaps you need to leave behind grudges you've nursed so your mind and heart are more receptive to God's Spirit.

Perhaps you need to leave behind fears about what the future might hold if you open yourself more fully to God's guidance.

I don't know what *you* need to leave behind...but I offer those as examples because I struggle with each of them myself sometimes. And it's hard to leave behind things and attitudes you've nurtured over time. It's hard... but God's grace is so big... and Jesus has so many miracles waiting for us. We just won't get to experience them as fully as possible if we're dragging around too much extra *stuff*.

Jesus blessed his first disciples with a miracle and they left *everything* behind in order to follow him.

May we notice the miracles Jesus works for us and others. May we be so inspired by those miracles that we choose to follow Jesus ever more closely. And, as we do so, may we leave behind us a trail of unnecessary stuff. Let us pray...

Loving and merciful God, you love us so much and you know our hearts and minds. Remind us of the miracles you have worked for us when we needed them most. Remind us of the miracles we've seen you work for others. Send your Spirit to draw us ever closer to you and to your Son, our Savior, Jesus. May we have the courage and strength to leave behind that which keeps us from growing in our love of you and in our call to help heal your broken world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.