

From Seeking to Surrender

Luke 5:1-11

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ January 21, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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, ² he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 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. 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 Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” ⁶ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. 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. ⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” ⁹ For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰ and 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.” ¹¹ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him. (Luke 5:1-11, NRSV)

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Jesus was trending. That’s not what they called it in those days but that’s what was happening. All it took was a couple of miracles – casting out a demon, healing an old woman¹ – and suddenly people wanted to know all they could about this mysterious rabbi from Nazareth. When we meet him at the beginning of chapter five on the shores of Lake Galilee, the crowds have gathered and are “pressing in on him” to hear whatever it is he has to say.

Truth is, Jesus has been trending ever since. While these days lots of people want nothing to do with the church and many others have rejected Christianity outright, you’d be hard pressed even these days to find anybody who isn’t at least a little curious about Jesus. After his plea to Jesus saved his life during an attack by a group of thugs, a man named Van Zan Frater created an image for a t-shirt that he began to sell in a local

park near his home in Los Angeles. *Jesus is My Homeboy*. The message was simple, and was Frater’s way of honoring the one he believed had saved his life. And whether you find the image acceptable or disrespectful, it caught on. Thousands and thousands of shirts and hats have since been sold, many to celebrities who otherwise probably wouldn’t identify themselves as Christians, people like Brad Pitt, Pamela Anderson, Ben Affleck, and Kanye West, each of them proud to be publicly associated with Jesus. As the old gospel song says, there’s just something about that name.



Some of you are here this morning because you’re curious about Jesus. You may not know what exactly to make of him. You may not be ready to trust him or follow him. But you’re curious, you’re seeking, and that’s the first step. You’d like to hear what he has to say. You’d like to investigate the claims about what he’s done. So like the crowd on the shores of Galilee that morning you’re pressing in closer. It’s a good thing. Those of you who now do follow Jesus in your life, how many of you first explored Christianity because you were curious about Jesus? It’s the best place to begin actually.

Notice that Jesus welcomes the curious. The crowd of seekers that morning was too large. But instead of turning them away, Jesus found a way to make himself accessible to everybody. Ever resourceful, Jesus noticed the boats on the shore left there by the fisherman who were nearby cleaning their nets. It was the perfect solution because in that region of Galilee there is a series of steep inlets, a zigzagging shore where each inlet forms a natural amphitheater. Even to this day if you go there and get in a boat and push out from shore you can speak in a normal voice and everybody on the shoreline can hear you clearly.² Jesus welcomes seekers and wants to make sure they can clearly hear what it is he has to say.

Simon was one of the fisherman there that day. He and his partners had just spent the night fishing and were

¹ See Luke 4:31-41

² N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), 53.

washing their nets so they could go home and rest. This wasn't sport fishing, remember. These men weren't out looking for trophies. This was their livelihood, and it was backbreaking work. In fact, they fished with nets so large they required several men to deploy. Since the nets were made of linen the fish could see them in the daylight, which meant these men had to go out at night to outsmart the fish. That night, however, they hadn't outsmarted a thing. It's one thing to come back from a fishing vacation empty handed. You still at least got to enjoy some time in the great outdoors. It's quite another thing, however, to come back empty handed when your family is depending on your nets being full. We shouldn't imagine Simon and his partners whistling and cracking jokes as they washed their nets. No, they were going home discouraged that day.

It's no small thing, therefore, that Simon agrees to take Jesus back out on the lake so that he can teach the crowds. We know from the chapter four that this isn't Simon's first interaction with Jesus. Jesus previously had not only come to eat at Simon's house one night but while he was there he miraculously healed his mother-in-law so that she could cook them dinner. Simon, in other words, must have been curious himself, curious to hear what Jesus had to say, curious enough to offer what he could – his boat – to make that possible.

And so if seeking is the first step towards discipleship, towards becoming a follower of Jesus, service is the next step, a willingness to help Jesus when it's convenient to do so, or at least possible to do so. This is akin to what friends and neighbors do for one another. If a neighbor needs to borrow my lawnmower or my truck, as long as my lawn mower or truck are working and available I'm happy to oblige. If a friend needs a hand helping him finish a project in his yard and I've got some free time that weekend, no problem. Glad to help. There are limits of course. If my neighbor asks me to give him my truck for good, I won't. If my friend tells me to come over and finish his yard project for him while he naps inside, chances are I'll decline.

Just like the church attracts people who are seeking Jesus, the church also attracts people who are willing to serve Jesus as they can, men and women who are willing to put their resources at the disposal of Jesus and his mission as they are able, and as it is convenient to do so. Now Jesus never forces anybody to serve him, of course, just as he didn't force Simon to let him use his boat. The text clearly says that Jesus "asked" for Simon's service. And when Jesus asks, lots of people are favorable enough towards him that they are willing to oblige.

Which leads to the next question I have for you. How many of you are willing to serve Jesus? You've moved beyond just being curious to the point where you're seen enough to be willing to get involved? Maybe you're giving some of your time, your energy, your material resources towards the work of Christ's church, towards his mission in this world? At some point the road to discipleship usually includes a demonstration of a willingness to serve Jesus when he asks you to serve him. But as the story demonstrates, that's not the end of the road.

Out on the lake now Jesus sits down in the boat, taking the customary position for teaching in those days, and teaches the crowds lining the shore who, we assume, were captivated by his words. Then, when the sermon was over, Jesus turns to Simon, who is right there next to him in the boat, and says to him, **"Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."** Funny way to end a sermon, don't you think?

There's no question this time. Did you catch that? He's not asking Simon but instructing. Depending on the tone, maybe he's even commanding. Which is quite remarkable actually. Who does Jesus think he is? The poor man has been up all night fishing without anything to show for it. His chores aren't done. He's dog-tired. He probably just wants to go home. He's already been exceptionally accommodating by loaning out his boat as a pulpit. And on top of it all, Jesus, with all due respect, is no fisherman. He's not giving Simon advice about how to repair the damaged wood on his boat, advice Simon might have welcomed from an experienced carpenter. I'm sure Simon wouldn't have tried to tutor Jesus on how to build cabinets. So where does Jesus get off giving fishing advice to Simon? No matter how you look at it, it's a lot to ask.

Naturally, Simon can't hide his true feelings. **"Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing."** He's polite but he's clear. Simon politely calls Jesus 'Master', a term of respect used in those days to address anybody in authority, but he also is clear that going back out to fish after a night of bad luck with nets that don't work in the daytime because the fish can see them is a bad idea from the start. There's not a fisherman alive that would blame Simon for politely declining Jesus' instructions and heading to shore to finish his chores so he can go home.

Of course, that's not what Simon does. **"Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."** This is where seeking that has become service becomes submission, that next step when a person not only follows Jesus when it's convenient to do so or when it makes sense to do so, but when a person follows Jesus no matter where Jesus is

leading. And the truth of the matter is that not everybody makes this step. Not everybody who is willing to serve Jesus is also then willing to submit to Jesus as well.

Notice something, however. Submission doesn't equal agreement. Simon clearly does not believe Jesus' plan is the best plan. There is nothing in him that thinks going back out to fish at that hour is a good idea. *But he obeys anyway.* He's seen enough of Jesus apparently, maybe even heard something in the message Jesus just delivered to the crowds from his boat, which leads him to respect Jesus enough to do what he has just told him to do.

This is submission. God says go. You don't want to go. You don't think going is a good idea. You don't see how going will benefit you or anybody else. Going now is not fun or convenient. But you go anyway. God says give. You don't want to give. You give anyway. God says wait. You don't want to wait. You wait anyway. God says forgive. You really don't want to forgive. You forgive anyway. That's submission. You obey Jesus not because it's exciting to do so, or because it will meet your own personal needs, or because you understand why what he says to do is leading down a path of wisdom, but you obey simply because he is Master and you are not.

When Esther and I were finishing our time in seminary in New Jersey and applying for jobs at churches, our preference was to return to the West Coast. In fact, we had several very attractive offers from congregations out this way. One congregation, in Rancho Palos Verdes, was literally built on the cliffs overlooking the beach in Southern California. When I interviewed there I imagined writing sermons while looking out my office window and watching the whales migrate back and forth each season. But then there was this one congregation in Omaha, Nebraska. Omaha, Nebraska. There is no beach in Omaha, Nebraska. I pictured watching the corn grow outside my office window and wondered if my sermons would receive the same inspiration that the whales would have provided. I'd never been to Omaha. I didn't know anybody in Omaha. Before my interview with the church there, I'm not sure I could have found Omaha on a map.

I clearly remember the evening when Esther and I sat in our little seminary apartment and agreed that we both sensed the Lord leading us to go to Nebraska. Before we made the phone call to accept the call, I remember opening up our atlas one more time and finding Omaha on the big map of the United States. We couldn't even see it on the map because it was covered up by the staple in the middle of the page. To

be honest, I was feeling a little like Peter must have been feeling that morning. "Master, you know – don't you? – that Omaha is in Nebraska, a long way from all the places I love? Yet if you say so, I will go and live there." To be honest, it was an act of submission. We didn't go kicking and screaming but going wasn't exactly our preference. We went because we knew that's where Jesus was leading us.

Here's the thing I learned through that experience and others like it I've had along the way. Obedience brings results. In retrospect, as it turned out Omaha was the perfect place for us to go. The congregation we served was a perfect fit for my gifts and for our family. For eight years I had a chance to grow as a pastor in a community that showed me loads of grace. We saw Christ do some amazing things there in and through us. And in the end we came to truly love the city and people of Omaha to the point where if God had called us to stay there we would have gladly stayed to this day.

Obedience brought results in Simon's case as well. As soon as Simon submitted to Jesus' instructions the unimaginable happened. The fishing nets were immediately filled to the breaking point with fish, so many that Simon had to signal his partners to come help them bring the catch to shore. Why? Well, Jesus may be a carpenter by trade and not a fisherman, but Jesus is also the very Son of God, the one through whom the very lake itself and all the fish in its waters were created. That means that in all areas of life, even areas where we may think we know better, Christ knows better. And so if we will submit to his leading, even if we don't have our heart in it, we can be prepared to see our obedience lead to unexpected results. We obey even though we don't see how it will meet our needs, but then we eventually are surprised by joy. We set out on a road that seems to lead nowhere exciting but then it turns into the adventure of a lifetime. In time, we see the wisdom of going down a pathway we at first thought led to nowhere.

So what about you? Are you willing to submit to Jesus? Not just serve him when it makes sense, but submit to him no matter what he tells you to do or not do, to go wherever he tells us to go or not go, to speak whenever he tells you to speak or not speak. Some of you besides me can give your own 'Omaha' examples, times in your life where you 'put out your nets' in submission to Jesus even though you weren't thrilled about doing so. But then later down the road you discovered Jesus actually knew what he was talking about and you found yourself so glad you listened and obeyed.

But let's be honest; not all of us have come to this place. And if that's you, if you're willing to serve Jesus

whenever possible but not quite ready to submit without exception, it's good to at least be honest about that. Most everybody is curious about Jesus. Most people in churches are even glad to serve Jesus when they can. Fewer of us, however, are willing to submit to Jesus. This is possible, of course, because in the modern Western church we have not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian. It's optional. You can be a member of a church, believe all the right things about Jesus, even serve him when it works out to do so, and still not submit to him as Lord to the extent that you will do whatever he tells you to do.

I need you to understand, however, that such an idea, the idea that a disciple could serve Jesus in some things without submitting to him in all things, is absolutely foreign to the Gospel. As we go through Luke this year you will clearly see that Jesus never suggests that discipleship apart from submission is a possibility. A writer named Dallas Willard defines discipleship this way: "A disciple is a person who has decided that the most important thing in their life is to learn how to do what Jesus said to do. A disciple is not a person who has things under control, or [necessarily] knows a lot of things. Disciples simply are people who are constantly revising their affairs to carry through on their decision to follow Jesus." His definition is spot on and ought to raise the following question in your mind: Am I somebody who is willing to submit to Jesus to the point that no matter where he leads me I will spend my life constantly revising my affairs to carry through with my decision to follow him?

But here's the thing. Believe it or not, submission isn't even the final step of discipleship. Notice what happens when Simon realizes that Jesus was right, when he realizes that the carpenter actually knows more than the fisherman when it comes to catching fish. He's humbled. Dropping to his knees right there in the boat he pleads with Jesus, **"Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"**

It's not an unusual response in the person who suddenly realizes he or she is in the presence of the holy and living God. Abraham only dared speak to the Lord after confessing, **"I who am but dust and ashes."**³ After recognizing how greatly he had underestimated the Lord, Job prayed, **"Now my eye sees you; therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."**⁴ Isaiah's words are perhaps most famous. After his confrontation with the holiness of God he declared,

"Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips!"⁵

I'm not convinced that in that moment Simon understood exactly who it was that was sitting in his boat beside him, that Jesus was in fact the eternal Son of God, the Messiah, the one come to save the world. Later, after Jesus changed his name to Peter, Simon would understand. For now, however, he may only have seen in Jesus the agency of God, that in some special way this man was connected to the Lord. But that was enough. He was humbled. No longer is this about fishing. It's now about life. And in life when you are confronted with the reality of the holiness of God you will be driven to your knees as well, not only because you've seen God's holiness but because you've seen, in contrast, your own sin and failure. Nobody knowingly stands proud in the face of Jesus. You can stand proud with your back turned towards Jesus. But if you face him, as he truly is, your knee will bow and, like Simon, you will want him to leave you be. Go away from me Lord. I'm not somebody you want to be around.

It's what happens next that changes everything, for Simon and for us as well. Simply grace. Jesus sees Simon's sin, his unwillingness to fully and joyfully trust. He doesn't minimize it. He doesn't contradict Simon's confession, try to do what we might do by saying, "It's okay, Simon. How could you have known? Cheer up, you went further than most people would have gone. Everybody makes mistakes." No, Jesus doesn't disregard Simon's sin *but neither does he let it disqualify Simon*. How in the world could Simon have anticipated that the next words out of Jesus' mouth would be: **"Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."** Instead of condemning Simon, *Jesus commissions him!* "I know what you are Simon. I knew it from the moment I saw you. So don't be afraid. You are still exactly the sort of person I want to have join me in my mission to save this world."

When Simon is confronted with the unimaginable grace of Christ the result is that it drives him to the final step of discipleship. He has no choice, really. If this man isn't worth following, nobody is worth following. And so in that moment seeking, which turned to service, which became submission, becomes sacrifice. And not just for Simon alone. **"When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him."**

When Simon submitted and put the boat out to deeper water and cast out his nets he did so willingly, but

³ Genesis 18:27

⁴ Job 2:5-6

⁵ Isaiah 6:5

without expecting much. You might say his heart wasn't in it. But then when he sets that same boat and nets aside and leaves them to go follow Jesus wherever Jesus might lead, it's different. This time Jesus doesn't even have to ask. Simon is already willing, even eager. Had he known at that point all that the next few years would hold in store, that ultimately he'd literally follow Jesus to the cross, would he still have gone? We don't know. All we know is that he did go. In that moment Simon and his friends made a decision that carried with it enormous economic, vocational and social ramifications as they left everything that had previously been of value to discover their fundamental sense of belonging and identity in relationship to this man Jesus, in the community being built around him, and in his redemptive mission in this world.⁶

You see – listen closely! - the person who ultimately surrenders to Jesus is the person who follows Jesus with joy. Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible. It's also a prayer of one who absolutely delights in the law of the Lord. Verse 97 captures the essence of the prayer: **“Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long.”** This is the person who has come to know and trust the love and goodness and wisdom of the Lord so much that whatever the Lord commands becomes a delight to obey. When the Lord says go I know that going is the best thing. When the Lord says wait, I'm eager to wait. When the Lord says give, I can't wait to give. When the Lord says love, or forgive, or speak, or befriend, I know that the path set before me is the best path even if I don't understand how that is possible.

What Simon would eventually discover is that he had surrendered to one who ultimately had come to do the same for him and for us all. Yes, Jesus came to seek us. He came a long way, actually to seek and save those who were lost. And he came to serve. He said himself he did not come to be served but to serve. And in all things he submitted, not to us, of course, but to his Father. And ultimately he surrendered, giving his life out of love for a world which had not earned such a sacrifice and did not even value it when it was given. And so when Peter ultimately discovered that the one he left everything on the beach that day to follow was one who would ultimately leave everything on the cross for him, he knew he had, by God's grace, chosen correctly in the one decision in life that ultimately matters. From then on he too was willing to joyfully give his life away, fishing for others so that they might also be caught up in the grace and love that transforms everything.

⁶ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 235.

I don't know what it is that Jesus has to say to you today in all this. He probably has something different to each one of us. I have a hunch, however, that it might have something to do with your response to his presence in your life and in this world. So rather than tell you what I think that might be, let me repeat these questions and simply ask you to listen for God's voice.

Do you come today seeking Jesus, curious but still standing at a distance? If so, what's keeping you from drawing closer, from pressing in?

Those of you who are Christians and have spent some portion of your life serving Jesus, doing things for him and for his mission as you are able, understand that doesn't necessarily mean that you are also willing to submit and do whatever it is Jesus asks of you. So are you? Are you willing to do the thing Jesus tells you to do that makes no sense or has no attraction to it?

And finally, what would it take for you to see submission fill with delight and become surrender, a *joyful willingness* to go wherever Jesus leads you to go, do whatever he asks you to do, say the words he gives you to say, and to love and forgive and welcome the people he also loves and forgives and welcomes?

Don't be afraid. Jesus knows everything about you but still wants to use you – yes, you! – to transform the world.

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Most everybody wants preachers to preach sermons that are relevant. In your view, what makes a sermon relevant?
2. Read Luke's prologue to his Gospel in Luke 1:1-4. What does the prologue tell us about what is to follow?
3. What do you think Luke wants Theophilus (and others like him) to get out of reading his 'orderly account'?
4. Do you have a high degree of trust in the authority and accuracy of the Gospel accounts? Why or why not?

5. Read Paul's words again in II Timothy 4:1-5.
In what way is the message here relevant for our day?
6. Historian Paul Johnson once wrote,
"Christianity is essentially a historical religion. It bases its claims on the historical facts it asserts. If these are demolished it is nothing."
What do you think he means? Do you agree?
7. Do you feel like Faith Presbyterian Church is a congregation where everybody is encouraged to ask questions, no matter what the questions might be? If not, what questions are you hesitant to ask?
8. Is the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ the most relevant message for our time and for all times? Why or why not?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

How do we know that the things we read about Jesus in the Bible are true, that these things actually happened?