

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
26<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time  
September 30, 2001

**“Called to Fish in the Deep”**  
**Luke 5:1-11; (Isaiah 6:1-8)**

We're sitting here, you and I, beside the lake of Gennesaret,  
which we know more fondly as the Sea of Galilee.  
The sunrise is glistening on the water as it ripples up against the shore.  
On the beach there are several tired fishing boats sitting empty.

We recognize many of the others who are gathered here with us:  
there's the college student who's been testing the list of do's and don'ts  
his parents handed him on the way out the door a few weeks ago;  
and the single mother who's so exhausted she can barely keep her  
eyes open;  
there's the middle aged man who wonders if the meaning of his life is  
summed up by the figures on his paycheck;  
and the husband and wife who can't look into each others eyes for fear  
the pain would undo them;  
and scores of others, sitting in numbed silence,  
with images of smoke, fire and falling glass  
still etched in their brains.

Here we all sit, drawn together for a few moments by a common yearning:  
We've come to hear Jesus. He's speaking to us now...  
His voice carries clearly across the morning air,  
and like the air, his words bring the promise of a new day.  
He calls your soul out from slumber and fully into consciousness.  
His words make you aware of your pain, but also strangely  
of the hope that lies deep within you.

Perhaps we wouldn't be listening so closely to the words that come from  
his lips, except that we've seen already what his hands can do.  
We were there at Simon Peter's house, just the other day,  
when Jesus stood over Simon's mother-in-law and healed her.  
We stayed late into the evening as the whole town came to him,  
bringing their fears, their diseases, their sinfulness, their despair,  
and Jesus laid his hands on each of them,  
and cured them.

And Simon –  
ever since that night, we've noticed a difference in Simon.  
He is visibly moved whenever Jesus comes near. Yet,  
like the rest of us, he's a little wary of this strong attraction.  
We all want to be near Jesus, but still we're afraid to get *too* close.  
We don't want Jesus taking *too* much notice of us,

for fear of what he might expect.  
We prefer sitting here on the shore, comfortably lost  
in the anonymity of the crowd.

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So we're caught a little off guard when Jesus asks Simon to use his boat.  
He only wants to go out a little way from the shore so he can teach the crowd.  
So, Simon accepts,  
and being his partners we climb into the boat with Simon and Jesus,  
lugging behind us the nets we've been washing on the shore.

You know about these old nets. They've been coming up empty lately.  
We cast them wide, and drag them long through the water,  
but again and again we're disappointed in these nets.

We keep hoping that these old familiar fishing tools –  
these institutions, these traditions, these habits –  
will work like they used to.  
We used to announce what time the doors of the church would open,  
and people dressed up and showed up.  
We used to sing the old songs, and everybody knew them and loved them.  
Used to be, when we read from the Bible, everybody knew the stories  
because they'd learned them at home and in Sunday School.  
We used to speak about Presbyterian doctrine, and everybody understood  
because they had learned the catechism as a child.  
We used to be a powerful and effective presence in our communities  
because the society looked to the church  
for moral and spiritual leadership.

But something happened during the night. We worked diligently,  
but now, in the morning, we've come up empty.  
So, we do what we can, just to stay busy:  
We tinker with our institution. We repair our buildings.  
We shuffle our committees around, hoping to spark something new.  
We sit on the shore and wash our nets.

It's not just churches, of course; it's our whole culture.  
Families are strained and breaking down.  
The education system worries us.  
Every year our culture becomes even more consumed with consuming,  
and less concerned with the character of its people.  
The threats to global security seem ever more elusive.

And we're not sure what to do about that old familiar world  
that's passing away,  
so we sit on the shore and wash our nets.

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Then one morning Jesus comes along. And he says,  
*Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.*  
Simon immediately gives voice to our resistance.  
He tells our wise teacher that we've already tried that – we've tried everything –  
and keep coming up empty.

But there comes a point for everyone who listens to Jesus  
when a decision must be made.  
Actually, there are many such points.  
They may come every day, or many times a day.  
Will we respond to Jesus' call  
to leave the safe complacency of the shore?  
to move beyond the shallow water and into a place of greater risk?  
Will we go with Jesus out into the deep waters  
and join him in doing something, and being something  
that really matters in our world?

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Simon always surprises us with his willingness to go.  
He leaps before he looks – we'd prefer to form a committee,  
but Simon follows Nike's advice and 'just does it.'  
In a way, you have to admire his courage:  
*Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.  
Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.*

In that moment of risky faith,  
what happens is a mystery beyond our understanding.  
The nets, empty so many times before, strain with the weight of a catch!  
The old boat creaks with excitement and barely manages to stay afloat.  
The blessing is so abundant, our old fishing apparatus  
is no longer suited for the catch.  
We begin to be afraid  
and wonder if we really wanted such a large catch after all.

Simon, too, is afraid. But Simon's fear runs at a deeper level.  
He knows that he is in the presence of the Holy  
and becomes painfully aware of his own shortcomings.  
He is undone.  
He falls to his knees and begs Jesus for mercy:  
*Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.*

Then Jesus, who clearly holds our lives in his hands, says to Simon,  
*Do not be afraid.*  
Jesus, who has just revealed the majesty and power of God, welcomes Simon –  
dirty, smelly, and full of self-doubt,

on his knees in the hull of an old fishing boat.

*Do not be afraid, Simon.*

Jesus doesn't deny that Simon Peter is a sinful man,

but neither does Jesus go away – rather,

he welcomes Simon as his disciple.

*Do not be afraid, Simon; from now on you will be catching people.*

You can almost see a hint of a grin on Jesus' face.

You know, all that net-washing back on the shore, I suspect,

had very little to do with this great catch of fish.

The great catch of fish was a gift of God.

The success of our efforts was utterly dependent on the hand of God;

we are but participants in what God is doing in the world.

Yet it is also true that this great catch of fish happened in this time and place,

because Jesus' disciples were willing to follow him

on a risky venture of faith out into the deep.

We were right about one thing: taking that first risky step with Jesus

leads to another, and another:

*From now on you will be catching people.*

Jesus calls us to a new way of life; a new vocation.

Jesus calls us to be a part of his mission to announce the reign of God

to a world that may not always receive that announcement

as good news.

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Jesus' call to go out into the deep waters reminds me of a conversation I had  
with Yadetta, a leader of the church in Ethiopia.

I had lunch with Yadetta when he was visiting the states a few years ago.

I asked him about the differences he saw between the church in America

which is so often struggling to survive,

and the church in Ethiopia,

which is growing at a mind-boggling rate,

so fast their nets are beginning to break, and their boats to sink –

literally, their institutional structure is not sufficient to

sustain the phenomenal growth of their churches.

Yadetta thought about my question for a minute.

I got the feeling his pause was not because he didn't know what to say,

but because he wanted to speak delicately.

He finally said that in America he sees big church buildings,

but they are often empty.

He said that in America the churches expect people to come to them;

the focus here is on pulpit ministry and the sanctuary ministry.

This ministry has its place, he said.

It is essential, but it cannot be the only ministry.

People will not come to church unless we go out first.

Fish don't just jump into the boat.  
In Ethiopia, Yadetta says,  
Christians consider it their calling to go and tell others about Jesus.  
They believe Jesus calls them all to go out and  
draw people into the kingdom of God.

It seems almost too obvious to point out, but the statistic is telling:  
greater than 80% of newcomers to Christian worship in our country  
come for the same reason:  
someone invited them.

Jesus calls us to go out with the gospel –  
into the deep waters of the pain of our world –  
and to cast our nets until people are captivated by the good news,  
and drawn into the kingdom of God.

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In the prophet Isaiah we find a model of faithful discipleship.  
Isaiah encounters the power and holiness of God –  
like Simon on the boat with Jesus,  
Isaiah is undone by God's awesome presence.

*Woe is me! I am lost,  
for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips;  
Yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts*

But also like Simon, Isaiah is touched and transformed by the mercy of God.  
The seraph announces the good news to him,  
*Your guilt has departed, your sin is blotted out*

And he hears the voice of the Lord saying,  
*Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*  
And Isaiah, compelled by the power of his own transformation, says,  
*Here am I; send me.*

We who have been touched and transformed by the power and grace of God  
are compelled forward to bear witness to this good news.

Simon Peter, James and John left everything and followed Jesus on his mission.  
Today the question is ours:  
Who will go out into the deep waters with Jesus  
and fish!