

St. Matthew's Church

NEW YORK CITY

FOLLOWING JESUS

Luke 5:1-11

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, February 7, 2010

The bottom line in this lesson from Luke is that disciples who would follow after Jesus must leave everything behind. Drop your nets, leave the fish for others to claim and clean; walk away from your livelihood, your life, and all that you have known, and follow Jesus. That is the charge from the lesson in today's Gospel. If you would be a disciple, this text implies, you must be prepared to do the same. Leave everything behind and follow Jesus.

Leaving everything and following Jesus is the way of discipleship. And this lesson from Luke certainly affirms the premise. If anyone would be a disciple of Jesus and John, they must be prepared to respond like Simon Peter and James and John, disciples who left everything and followed after Jesus.

Examples of Discipleship: (1.) Just a few verses later in this same chapter of Luke, Jesus calls a tax collector named Levi to follow Him. "And he (Levi) got up, left everything, and followed Him" (Luke 5:28). Levi responded precisely as Peter and the others had. He left everything to follow Jesus.

(2.) In chapter 14 Jesus gives further instructions, He sets out conditions for the disciples to model their lives after. Followers of Jesus are told they must forsake family to follow and must carry the cross of Christ. At the end of the passage Jesus summarizes by saying: "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions" (Luke 14:33).

(3.) When a certain rich ruler comes to Jesus and asks, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 18:18), Jesus first responds with a lesson on the commandments. But the clincher is when Jesus instructs him on one more requirement. "Sell all that you own and distribute the money to

the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Luke 18:22).

(4.) And when present in the temple one day, Jesus observed a poor widow give her offering to God. Jesus called the disciples attention to her action and praised her before them all, saying, “she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on” (Luke 21:4).

When a certain ruler heard this command from Jesus, Luke tells us that he became sad. I suspect others did too. In fact, my guess is that most of you listening to these words right now have become more than sad. Down right indignant might be a more realistic appraisal. Indignant and irritated and frustrated might all be better descriptive terms to classify our response to this message. I know that I for one struggle with this lesson. If the truth be known, I don’t think I have any idea what it is like to leave everything behind to follow Jesus!

Introduction: Peter, his brother Andrew, and his partners James and John had spent the night fishing with dragnets. It was backbreaking work because it involved laying out a great net in a semicircle, encompassing over 100 feet. It was hard work that only strong men could perform. They had worked through the night without as much as a fish. So, on shore they are washing and mending and arranging their nets for drying.

The monotony of the work day was broken by the presence of a large crowd pressing around Jesus “listening to the word of God.” Jesus was preaching “the good news of the kingdom of God.” His preaching with characteristic authority and power drew a packed crowd. So Jesus asked if he could use Simon Peter’s boat as a floating pulpit, and Peter and Jesus and probably Andrew too anchored the boat a few yards from where, where Jesus resumed his teaching, his voice carrying effectively over the waters to all gathered on the shore.

The Divine Request: We do not know how much attention Peter was paying to Jesus’ message. What ever the case, Jesus soon had Peter’s full attention. “When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch. Simon answered, Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.” What right did Jesus, a carpenter from Nazareth, have to ask an expert Galilean fisherman who had spent his life on

the lake to do this bidding? Being sure of what Jesus wanted, he responded, “But because you say so, I will let down the nets.” What an example this is for you and me! Jesus’ word comes, and it is demanding. We have some initial reticence. But we are sure he is the one who is speaking, and there is no doubt about what he wants, so we do it. And we are not sorry.

The Divine Catch: “When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.” Peter could hardly hang on to this dragnet as an incredible catch of fish filled the nets and the boat was pulled toward the fish. As they harvested their catch, the two boats, each seven and a half feet wide and over twenty-seven feet long, filled to the gunwales and began sinking. It was a raw outpouring of power; a massive nature miracle. The onlookers saw that the fish of the sea were obedient to Jesus’ will as the frogs and flies and locusts were to Yahweh in Egypt centuries earlier.

The Disciples Brought to Their Knees: “When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, ‘Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!’ For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebebee, Simon’s partners.” Peter had been brought personally into the sphere of Jesus’ mighty kingdom power. This was not the first exposure to Christ’s authority, but this time Jesus ministered in Peter’s personal universe; his sea, his boat, his nets and so the significance came to him as never before.

What brings disciples to their knees, however, is not the thought or the actual implementation of leaving everything behind; rather, it is the extravagant abundance poured out by the gracious God! It was the miraculous catch of fish that was hard for Simon Peter to handle. Confronted with the miraculous event, a holy epiphany of a gracious God, Simon Peter fell to Jesus’ knees and implored Jesus, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” Simon Peter and all who were with him “were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken.”

Leaving everything behind to follow Jesus was easy. In fact, it was a rather natural response to a supernatural revelation of a giving God. What was difficult for Peter and the others was to witness the miraculous catch and to come to the realization that they were in the holy presence of a good and

gracious God. Peter was overwhelmed by the sense of being in the presence of the holy, of being in the midst of an epiphany.

Humbled to his knees by this benevolent God, afraid to face the extravagant giver of an abundant catch, Peter implored the Lord to go away. Fully aware of his own unworthiness and sinful nature, Peter was brought to his knees in confession before Jesus. "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For this lesson is rally not about the rather mundane aspect of discipleship, where one sacrifices for the sake of following Jesus. That is the easy part that comes naturally after an encounter with Jesus' call to follow. The difficult part of this lesson is demonstrated for us by Peter. For the real challenge of discipleship is how to stand before a holy God!

And of all the gracious gifts our Lord bountifully pours into our nets, none is more miraculous than the gift of absolution, the gift of forgiveness of our sin. Peter's cry is that he is unworthy, sinful, and unclean. It is a cry of confession before his Lord. But the lord's response to Peter is filled to the brim with forgiveness. "Do not be afraid," Jesus says to Peter. Do not tremble and grieve over your past. Accept the call, accept the invitation, accept the welcome into the Lord's service, accept the forgiveness and the opportunity for new life offered by Jesus. "Do not be afraid," Jesus says to you and to me as well. Accept Jesus' offer of forgiveness and new life through faith in his name.

Luke concludes by saying; "So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him." "Followed" is a heavily freighted expression signifying the deepest inward attachment.