

Catching Faith in a Sea of Doubt
Text: Luke 5:1-11
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Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 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. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.' When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; 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.' When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

The year after I graduated from college I spent volunteering as a youth minister in Juneau, Alaska. Juneau is the capital, and was built on the site of a summer settlement for the native Tlingit tribes who fished the thin waterway that flows between the mainland and Douglas Island. Folks who live there joke that the natives knew better than to camp there in the winter, when the winds howl between the mountains and what little sun appears hides behind the peaks for most of the day. Juneau is land-locked by Mendenhall glacier flowing from the Juneau Icefield, which is the fifth largest icefield in North America. This means that there is no way to build a road to Juneau – if you want to see it you must fly or take a boat.

The layout of the city of Juneau is something like the capital letter “H” There is a long road that extends up and down the mainland, and a long road that extends up and down the coastline of Douglas Island and a short bridge that connects the Mainland to Douglas Island. In addition to the glacier, the town of Juneau is shrouded by mountains on all sides both on the mainland and on Douglas Island. If you see a picture of downtown, you will see how the homes and buildings are nestled in between these three towering mountaintops.

I take such time to describe this place where I lived for a year because it is hard to imagine if you have not been there. Pictures don't seem to do it justice. In my time in Juneau I lived in a handful of different places; One of which was a home on Douglas Island. Since I did not have a car I learned quickly that if I had the time, walking got me where I wanted to go – so every morning I bundled up and walked across the bridge to the church where I was working.

At the center of the bridge, if you turn and look south...the view is breathtaking. In some ways I am reminded of this view when I cross the various bridges in our neck of the woods – most often the Tappan Zee. But the bridge view in Juneau is beyond imagining. Looking south, with mountains on both sides, your eyes follow the thin passage of water south towards British Columbia. The water continues as it weaves through islands scattering throughout Southeast Alaska – some inhabited and some not. Some of them dusted with snow-peaks; all of them falling dramatically into the ocean.

Every morning when crossing towards downtown I would stop at the top of that bridge. It was a view not many could enjoy – the cruise ships could not come that far into the channel because it was too shallow, and cars passing over the bridge sped too fast to enjoy it. It is the kind of view that forces you to acknowledge your own smallness in the face of such vast and powerful greatness.

“Woe is me!” Isaiah says, “I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips!” Peter says, “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!” Each of these men has just had an experience with God that is so powerful that they cower in reponse.

Isaiah has seen a vision of a God so enormous that the hem of his robe fills the entire temple. He is awestruck by the sight of flying seraphs with six wings and the building that shakes and the voices resounding with singing and then the whole place filling with smoke. The fear that Isaiah feels is overwhelming but even more overwhelming is Isaiah's sense of his own small self. “Woe is me!” he says, ‘I am unworthy of this.’

Simon Peter too is faced with something so amazing and powerful that he is overwhelmed with his sense of smallness. He has been up all night fishing with James and John – exhausted and frustrated with a night catching nothing but seaweed. Jesus is there too, preaching what Luke calls for the first time the word of God. The crowd that gathers is so big that Jesus decides to push out onto the water in one of the boats, to help amplify his voice so that all can hear.

Whatever was preached that morning, Simon Peter is moved. So when Jesus tells Simon Peter to cast his nets, he balks only slightly before he obeys. Simon warns Jesus of his unsuccessful night of fishing, but then says, "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

When the fishermen cast their nets one last time they witness only what one can call a miracle. They use nets meant for night fishing, after a night of empty casting - with this set up they should not catch a minnow. But in following the will of Jesus they come up with such abundance that the nets creak under the weight of fish and the two boats used to haul the fish in begin to fill with water from the pressure of the filled nets. It is after this most amazing event that Simon falls to his knees - his view of the catch only emphasizes the contrast between his sense of smallness in the face of the greatness of Jesus: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" "This is too much for me!" he seems to say, "I am too little for you!"

Our own sense of unworthiness does not always show itself so plainly as Isaiah's cry in the face of God. It most often shows itself in our lives as doubt. Doubt in ourselves and in others, doubt in our ability to accomplish what we hope to, doubt in our own certainty about life, parenting, truth, God. We believe ourselves to be unworthy because we are uncertain of so much; Uncertain enough to doubt our ability to care for those who need us, uncertain enough to doubt our ability to make the best decisions instead of the easy ones. Uncertain enough to doubt whether the decision we have already made will carry us through to safety.

But doubt is not negation of faith. Like the young Mary who responds to the angel's announcement of her pregnancy, "How can this be?" and then later, "Here I am, servant of the Lord," there is a certain leap of faith taken when one answers "Yes," when one thinks and feels "Are you kidding?" Like confirmation faith partners who say, "I don't think you really want me... but I would love to be a faith partner," or any of us that think "this person does not know all my faults," but say, "I will serve," there is a trust in God instead of a trust in ourselves that allows us to do follow and serve. There is a belief in the idea that something bigger than ourselves is at work in our midst.

In her book "Leaving Church," Barbara Brown Taylor describes how in her early years in parish ministry, she conceived of faith as the core certainty about God and godly things that equipped her for ministry. She describes how she had reasonable answers for all the questions of life that confronted her along the way. It was not until she experienced the slow loss of her father to cancer that she began to feel her way into a

different concept of faith. As she describes her experience sitting by his bedside in Hospice Atlanta, she says this:

“(My dad) and I were past talking by then, which meant that I never found out where he was with God. All I found out was how helpless love can be, with nothing left to do but suffer alongside with the beloved. Marooned by my father’s bed day after day, listening to him whimper in the night, unsure what he believed about God, unsure that it mattered, wanting to pray, for him and for me, without managing anything much beyond “Please,” **I discovered that faith did not have the least thing to do with certainty.** Insofar as I had any faith at all, that faith consisted of trusting God in the face of my vastly painful ignorance, to gather up all the life in that room and do with it what God alone knew how to do.”

“Since then,” she says, “I have learned to prize holy ignorance more highly than religious certainty and to seek companions who have arrived at the same place.”^[i]

I find it fascinating to realize that in our text for this morning the doubt of both Isaiah and Simon Peter come before the call. In both of our stories this morning the call comes after admission of sinfulness and unworthiness. Isaiah says, “I am an unclean man,” Simon Peter says, “I am a sinful man,” and Jesus says “Follow me, and you will catch people...”

As we turn from Simon Peter’s view to the response of Jesus we notice that Jesus does not even acknowledge Simon Peter’s confession and humility. Jesus does not forgive him or heal him, he does not tell him to repent of his doubt. Instead Jesus puts him to work. Jesus says, “Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching people.” And as Simon Peter leaves all his belongings behind he chooses in that moment to follow in spite of his doubts about his own worth. He chooses to follow because his smallness is embraced by Christ’s immense greatness.

“Do not fear,” Jesus says, “from now on you will be catching people.”

The response that Jesus gives to Peter’s doubting heart is not to erase his doubt in himself, it is not to convince him so that he is clearly sure of himself for the remainder of his journey. Instead Jesus only says, “Do not fear,” and asks Peter to join his journey even in his doubtfulness, and to ask others to join this journey as well. Jesus says, “Do not fear, but come with me anyway. Bring your doubt, your questions, bring others too; I am not about certainty. I am about hope.”

“Do not fear,” Jesus says, “from now on you will be catching people.” And perhaps the idea of catching people even as we doubt our faith or ourselves seems hypocritical or confusing. If catching people means being certain of every thing we believe about God or Jesus then we are sunk.

But if catching people means that we invite others to join us in our uncertainty then there is hope. If catching people means that we ask others to celebrate our lives together – both the good parts and the difficult parts without trying to explain them away then there is grace. If catching people means that we invite our neighbors to labor together to leave this world a little more like the kingdom of heaven, well the Church just might be a place of wholeness.

The community of Christ embraces our doubt and our shortcomings in order to do the work of the Kingdom. And it is because we do this work – the work of healing and feeding and serving and hugging – that the church grows. It grows because we are excited about the work we do here and we want to share the excitement. It grows because a loving community is sure to attract people seeking to love and be loved. It grows because we are willing to live with uncertainty, trusting God in the face of our smallness and God's expansive greatness.

You are a part of the catching greatness of God. "Do not fear," Jesus says, "from now on you will be catching people." Amen.

i[i] Taylor, Barbara Brown, *Leaving Church* Harper Collins, San Francisco, CA 2006 p 224