

**“Caught!”<sup>1</sup>**  
**Luke 5:1-12**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany**  
**February 10, 2019**

Simon Peter owed Jesus. Before this fishing expedition, Jesus had gone to Simon’s house where his mother-in-law had a high fever. Jesus stood over her and healed her. I’ve been to Peter’s house in Capernaum. It’s a small house in a small village. There’s one synagogue in town, a little smaller than the footprint of our assembly room. Jesus had healed a man that morning in the synagogue and I gather that word spread quickly which is probably how Jesus came to be at Simon’s house. “There’s a healer in town who might be able to heal your mother-in-law. Send for him.” That’s the way I imagine it.

So when Jesus comes to the shore sometime later, Simon has no choice but to do what is asked of him, even though Jesus is kind of odd or even irritating about it. Imagine someone showing up at your place of work, climbing into the passenger seat of your car without asking and telling you, “Take me for a ride.” That’s basically what Jesus does, according to Luke. “He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore.” And what’s Simon going to say? “Sorry, it’ll cost you?” “Sorry, I’m busy?” No. Simon owes Jesus so he takes him out.

Motivation is really important here because church folk tend to think of Simon as a saint. Technically, of course, he is a saint, but that comes later. At this point in the story, Simon doesn’t seem interested in Jesus, or faith, or religious stuff at all.

Some of the scholars see it differently. Peter is the one, after all, who pushes the conversation toward the religious. “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” They suggest that this is the natural response from someone who finds herself standing in the presence of the living God. Like Isaiah in the presence of God in the temple – the text that the lectionary encourages us to read today. There Isaiah proclaims, “I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips!” But I’m not sure that I buy this argument. I’ve been with fishermen and women before. I think a more natural expression in the face of such a miraculous catch would be more like “This is the best day of my life!” or “Teach me how to do that so I never have to go hungry again!”

Nobody else has reacted to Jesus this way. The people praised him when he preached in most of the synagogues (4:15). They were amazed by him when he commanded unclean spirits (4:36). Peter’s mother-in-law served him when he healed her of the fever (4:39). And the crowds – everybody else – looked for him intently after all of this (4:42). They wanted to get close to Jesus.

*Peter is the only one who’s trying to get away from Jesus.* No, I don’t think Simon speaks like this because he thinks this is what you’re supposed to do when

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the Rev. Ellen Crawford True, whose paper on this text informed this sermon.

you are in the presence of the holy. I think he's more like, "Get out of here because I'm not a religious person!" "Get out of here because I'm not who you think that I am." "Get out of here because I'm not the kind of person you're looking for."<sup>2</sup>

There's good reason for him to think that way. To call yourself a sinner wasn't just some language about his overall state of separation from God. It was language used by religious elites to label people who could not attend the temple services regularly, could not perform the ritual sacrifices and therefore were not ceremonially cleansed of their sin. Most poor people fit into this category.<sup>3</sup>

And yet on *this very person* – this fisher person with no religious credentials, no expressed interest in or access to religious things, *Jesus will build his church*. It's instructive, I think, since the church in North America has been in the habit of doing ministry from the complete reverse perspective. Unlike Jesus who goes out to teach people where they are, we wait for people to come to us. Unlike Jesus who meets people where they are regardless of their beliefs, habits, customs, or practices, we expect people to buy into church dogma and teaching before they are capable of following Jesus anywhere. Unlike Jesus who seems to see religious people as a problem and non-practicing folk as the people most likely to want what Jesus is offering, the church has tended to focus our ministry and our message on insiders who say the correct theological things and act in religiously "correct" ways.

Jesus, on the other hand, *brings healing* to someone close to Simon. And he *brings fish* to fishermen who need it. He gives them what they need. And in order to bring more healing to more people and more food to more people and more teaching to more people and more love to more people he recruits leaders who don't see themselves first and foremost as religious. People whose natural instincts are to *run away from* religious leaders *not toward them*.

And I wonder what it would look like if the church as a whole looked at our mission *that way* instead of the kind of religious-minded institutionalism of the past. I wonder what it would require from us? I would imagine that it could be both threatening and thrilling. Threatening because the church would fill up with people who haven't seen themselves as religious. People haven't seen themselves as worthy or maybe interested in religious rites or procedures. People who are hungry for healing or hungry for abundance or hungry for release from captivity. But it would also be thrilling because it means that the people I often meet might be drawn into the kind of community that Jesus seems intent on building.

Some of the people here who pull me aside and whisper all the reasons why they're not sure if they belong in this community because their belief structure isn't orthodox, or their family structure has been called into question by religious people

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<sup>2</sup> William H. Willimon, "Get Out of Here," "Living by the Word," *Christian Century*, vol. 121, no. 2, 21.

<sup>3</sup> see Justo Gonzalez, *Luke, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: WJK, 2010), 75: "Peter is not confessing to any particular sin, but rather to his own essential sinfulness. His declaration may also have social connotations, for many among the Jewish elite called 'sinners' all those who could not attend worship at the temple regularly, perform all the ritual sacrifices, and thus be ceremonially cleansed from their sin. Thus poor people—especially those living far from Jerusalem and in semipagan Galilee—were considered to be particularly sinful and unclean."

in the past. People who aren't sure they can embrace the church's teaching on this or that but who hunger for more bread for the world and more healing for the community. People who aren't defined by their religious competence, but by their inability to get away from God's calling on their life.

Jesus tells Simon Peter and his comrades that he will teach them how to catch people. Apparently, their big catch is enough to convince them to leave what little they own and set out for the unknown. But that translation doesn't quite get it right. The Greek is more like "I'll teach you to catch *living* people." Not perfect people. Not religiously purified people. Not religious people. But *living people*, which is another way of saying *real* people.

Simon was caught by Jesus. And who wouldn't want to get tangled up in that kind of a community? The one that's centered around a teacher who wants to give abundance to people scraping by. The one that's centered around a rabbi who wants to give healing to people on the edge? Who wouldn't want to leave everything to build that kind of community? A community of people who bring their hunger for a better world, their thirst for greater healing, their living, breathing questions into the community of faith.

I've been asked all week about what's going on in Virginia. My short answer is that we're all accountable for our actions. Forgiveness is available to everyone who confesses their sin, but the granting of forgiveness does not necessarily mean that things continue as they were. And when you receive forgiveness you have to do your best to make amends. But the biggest question in Virginia isn't whether the politicians should be allowed to continue. It's how is the state going to find a way to tell the truth about its history and root out the culture of white supremacy that continues to infect so many of its institutions?

Yet watching us all invest ourselves so deeply in the daily news cycle and in the actions of the powerful – be they politicians, or celebrities, or business leaders of all kinds, sometimes I wonder if we've forgotten that the most powerful kind of change that God brings about happens just as often from below as it does from the powerful people above. Jesus called Simon while the world's attention was focused on somewhere other than Capernaum. And yet this real live person became the rock on whom Jesus built the church. What happens in your life might just be more significant than you think.

While all of this was exploding in Virginia this week, a colleague from Durham reached out to say their church may have to hire security for their next Scout troop meeting. Earlier this week their church's troop was leading the pledge of allegiance at the Durham City Council meeting. And one of those scouts from this church took a knee. In an interview this ten year-old white boy explained, "I took a knee to protest racial discrimination." He goes on to say quite matter-of-factly that he plans to take a knee many more times to come.<sup>4</sup>

And my first thought was: looks like Jesus caught another one.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cbs17.com/news/local-news/durham-county-news/durham-10-year-old-kneels-during-pledge-of-allegiance/1758163903>