

Same Old, Same Old

Luke 5:1-11

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." (Luke 5:4-5)

It is early morning, and Simon Peter is cleaning his fishing nets after a miserable night on the lake. He and his partners have worn themselves out, casting nets from dusk till dawn. When the sun rises, they have nothing to show for their efforts but sore muscles and weary hearts; their nets are empty.

Just then, Jesus shows up, steps into Simon's boat, and tells his would-be disciple to "put out into the deep water." That is, to do the *same old same old* one more time, with no guarantee of better results.

Understandably, Simon protests: "Master, we have worked all night long." But then he obeys: "Yet if you say so, I will." As soon as Simon's net hits the water, everything changes. His emptiness gives way to epiphany.

I love this story for many reasons. First, I love that it describes failure so honestly. I'm no fisherman, but I know what it's like to work hard at something that matters, and have nothing to show for my efforts when I'm done. We all do. We all know what it's like to pour ourselves into a job, a relationship, a ministry, a dream, only to come away exhausted, thwarted, irritated, and *done*.

But if Simon's experience is representative, Jesus has a penchant for showing up at precisely such moments of loss and defeat. For reasons we often don't understand until later, he asks us to return to old sore spots of failure, and our spiritual health depends on how we respond to his invitation. Notice that when he asks, he doesn't stand at the shore and send us off; he steps into the boat and ventures into the deep water with us. Is his timing maddening sometimes? Yes. But maybe his timing is also perfect. Maybe we're most open to revelation when we've exhausted our

own resources, when we've got nothing to lose in saying yes to one more attempt, this time with Jesus at our side.

Second, I appreciate the way the story honors the "same old same olds" of our lives. Jesus's call to Simon is specific and particular, rooted in the language, culture, and vocation the fisherman knows best. Simon and his partners understand the nuances of Jesus's "fishing for people" metaphor in ways I never will. They know from years of experience what depths of patience, resilience, intuition, and artistry professional fishing require. Simon knows the tools of the trade, the limitations of his body, and the life-and-death importance of timing, humility, and discretion. Most of all, he knows the water. He knows how to respect it, how to listen to it, and how to bring forth its best. When Jesus shows up and commissions the seasoned fisherman, Simon understands the call not as a directive to leave his experience and intelligence behind, but to bring the best of his knowledge and expertise forward—to become even more fully and freely himself.

This suggests to me that we're not called to follow Jesus in the abstract. We don't become Christians "in general," as if faith involves nothing more than attending church or being a nice person. If we're going to follow Christ at all, we'll have to do it in the particulars of the lives, communities, cultures, families, and vocations we find ourselves in. We'll have to trust that God prizes our intellects, our backgrounds, our educations, and our skills, and that God will bless and multiply the daily stuff of our lives for God's purposes.

In other words, Jesus's invitation to venture into deep water is a promise to cultivate us, *not* to sever us from what we love. It's a promise rooted in gentleness and respect, not coercion. It's a promise that when we dare to "go deep," God will enliven our efforts in ways we can't imagine.

Third, I love the liberation and abundance at the heart of this story. At a time when the fishing industry in Palestine is fully under the control of the Roman Empire, when Caesar owns every body of water, and all fishing is state-regulated for the benefit of the urban elite, Jesus dares to challenge the system. He knows full well that fishermen can't obtain licenses to fish without joining a syndicate. He knows that most of what they catch is exported, leaving local communities impoverished and hungry. He knows that the Romans collect exorbitant taxes each time fish are sold, and that to catch even one fish outside of this exploitative system is illegal.

How amazing (given this historical context) is an image of boats so laden with fish that even a weathered fisherman like Simon Peter finds the catch overwhelming. This is extravagant generosity. Food for all, food security for all, justice for all, nurture for all. In this eucharistic image of plenitude, Jesus shows Simon what God's kingdom looks like. God's

kingdom is not Caesar's. God's kingdom suffers no empty nets, no empty tables. God's kingdom is good news for all.

Lastly, I love this story because it tells the truth about my fraught journey with faith: "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." I'm suspended in the gap between those two searing sentences. Is it just me, or do we all live in the gap between weariness and hope, defeat and faith, resignation and obedience? Though we're often reluctant to admit it, for fear of sounding ungrateful or irreverent, life can be a grind. A same old same old of monotony and failure. Even the most earnest and hardworking among us can land up on shore some mornings with empty, stinking nets tangled in our fingers, wondering what is wrong with us.

The hardest thing to do at such moments is to make the leap of trust that Simon makes. "*Yet if you say so, I will.*" Yet if you say so, I will try again. Yet if you say so, I will be faithful to my vocation. Yet if you say so, I will choose depth instead of shallowness. Yet if you say so, I will trust that your presence in the boat is more precious than any guarantee of success.

Yet if you say so, I will cast my empty net into the water, and look with hope for your kingdom to come.