



First United Church of Oak Park

All This Because of Fish?

Luke 5

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Peter's mother-in-law was sick. Very sick, actually. So sick she was caught in that shivering, burning middle distance that makes loved ones afraid, that makes them think — maybe she's not going to get better. It was that fear that drove Peter to go find Jesus — a man he had never met — but who was reputed to be able to work wonders and who was in their own fishing town of Capernaum that very day.

Jesus was in the synagogue teaching, and Peter asked Jesus if he could come and make his family well again. Jesus agreed, walked to Peter's house, stood over Peter's mother-in-law, and with just words — words — she was well again. She popped up from her sick bed and she launched straight into — “I hadn't been expecting guests, sorry for the state of the house, let me make you something to eat, no, no, I insist.”

The sickness was gone, and it was as if even the body's memory of pain was gone, too. This took place about sunset, and everyone who saw it happen ran out of Peter's house and found their own friends and family and loved ones who were sick and brought them to Peter's house, too. All night long, Peter watched Jesus cure every single person who was brought before him. Every single sick person in Capernaum left Peter's home well again. The city would have been filled with shouts of joy from sunset to sunrise.

So what did Peter do in the morning? Did he fall to his knees, confess his sins, pledge his life to Jesus, and leave it all behind? No. The next day, Peter went back to work. Peter went back to fishing.

It was only by happenstance that Peter encountered Jesus again. Jesus was teaching on the shore of Lake Gennesaret, sometimes called the Sea of Galilee. The shoreline was a busy place filled with commerce, and a huge crowd had gathered to listen to Jesus. It got to the point that Jesus looked around for some way of getting a bit of distance from the crowd, and he saw a small fishing boat that happened to be nearby. And in the boat, Peter was hard at work at one of the day-to-day tasks of being a fisherman.

Jesus asked Peter to take him out onto the water just a little ways out, so that this crowd could actually hear him speak. The man very well might have saved his mother-in-law's life — so if he wanted to go on the water, out on the water they would go.

At the end of it all, after Jesus had finished what he had to say and the crowd had taken their fill of words, Jesus turned to Peter and had something to say to him. Perhaps it was by way of thanking Peter for his help, or out of concern that this man not go home with nothing to show for a day of work, or perhaps for reasons of his own, Jesus said to Peter: "Let us set out into the deep water. Cast your nets there."

Fishing had not been good, but Peter was not about to tell this man no, so he did it. He cast his nets into the sea, and he hauled on the nets and found them teeming with an uncountable mass of fish. Fins and scales and gills smelling of the sea and more even than the boat could hold. And Peter fell to his knees and clutched at Jesus' feet. The next steps Peter would take would be to leave everything behind and follow Jesus. His life from that moment on would be dedicated to God.

All that, over fish. It was a remarkably large number of fish, true. But it was nothing other than a net filled with fish, something Peter had seen a hundred, hundred times. Peter had watched Jesus cure the sick with just a word, but then Peter went back to his ordinary life. Peter had seen Jesus cure every single sick person in the city of Capernaum in just one night — but it is fish that make him drop to his knees, fish that make him confess his sins, fish that make him pledge his life, fish that make him leave it all behind, fish that make him follow Jesus. All that over fish?

Of course, it is fish. Jesus cured the sick and Peter saw a holy man, a person full of the power of heaven — amazing, true — but it had nothing to do with Peter, it didn't require Peter to do anything. This man Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit, and Peter was not, and so he went back to his ordinary life, having seen someone else do extraordinary things — awestruck — but not transformed.

It is one thing to watch Jesus do something incredible. It's quite another for Jesus to say to Peter — you, come here and help me. I need your boat, your nets, your oars, your arms, your life, I have holy work to do, and you are going to help me. Let us set out into the deep water. Cast your nets there. Of course, it is fish. The great work of heaven touches Peter's ordinary life, sweeps up and implicates the ordinary things of Peter's world. Fish. Of course, he is transformed.

It is easy to think that God reaching into someone's life would be dramatic — wondrous — miraculous — angel visions totally divorced from the rest of the way life works. But that's not what God is like most of the time, and miracles are overrated anyway. Peter watched miracle healings for eight hours straight, but it took fish to make him a disciple, because fishing is what Peter knew, fishing is what Peter could give. God asked Peter — I need you,

just as you are. Of course he is transformed. How could he stay the same?

If you are waiting for God's call upon your life, if you are wondering when you will hear it, how it shall come, what it will be like, learn this from the apostle Peter: God will call you in the midst of the ordinary stuff of life. The holy work of what is normal, the daily bread of existence. It will look like something you've seen before, a net full of fish, a person crying out for help, a law crying out to be changed, a child crying out for comfort, a world crying out for justice.

The spirit of God, still living, still moving in the world, God reaches into the ordinary stuff of life, the ordinary places of our world and says: you, you are going to help me. I need your desk job, your Zoom meetings, your parenting; I need your cardboard protest signs, your teaching, your sobriety; I need your med school training, your accounting certificate, your Saturday morning walk in the woods. I need your heartache, your divorce, your diagnosis; I need your coming-out story, your love, your anger. I need your prayers full of caring, I need your hands full of healing, I need your life full of living, I need your death full of loving. There is holy work to do, and you are going to help me. Let us set out into the deep water, you and I.