A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

“*Answering the Call*”

Luke 5.1-11

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Heroes and heroines in the Bible come in all shapes and sizes, but they have one thing in common: when they hear the call of God, they respond by leaving behind whatever they were doing. Isaiah says, “Here am I. Send me.” Jeremiah says, “I am young and don’t know what I’m doing, but if you say so, I’ll do it.”

Answering the call of God is the single most important virtue of heroes and saints: from Abraham to Moses to David to Solomon. And they make great stories. The most well-known and well-loved of these stories is our Gospel reading this morning. Early on in his ministry, Jesus attracted crowds to listen to him. In this story, He is teaching on the shores of the lake as crowds press in closer and closer. Spotting two empty boats on the shore line, Jesus figures he can amplify his message to the crowds from a bit off shore. The fishermen who went with those boats were wrapping up a disappointing night of fishing, and now were dutifully washing their nets. Their empty nets. Their nets that had betrayed them by coming back up to the boat empty each time they let them down in the dark deep waters. Such is the life of a fisherman. He doesn’t always catch the fish. A salesman doesn’t always close the deal. A quarterback’s passes are not always caught. A teacher’s students don’t always soak up the knowledge. Such is life as it is lived. Like Guy Clark intones: *It don't matter how much it hurts; You've got to tell the truth. Some days you write the song; Some days the song writes you*.

Simon, Peter as he would be called, is the captain of one of those empty fishing boats. Yes, that Simon, that Peter, the one who would be the Rock on which the church of Christ would be built, the one who holds the keys to the kingdom, the one whose name adorns the largest church in the world. All of that is yet to be. For now, he’s a disappointed, tired, failed, frustrated fisherman with no fish. As he’d been washing the nets, he could hear Jesus teaching all these crowds on the shoreline. I wonder if Peter’s fishing failure was amplified by the missed opportunity to sell the catch-that-would-have-been to this waiting crowd. It’s a sad deal when you have customers but no product to sell.

Well, you know what happens next. Jesus, (definitely not a fishermen), tells a fisherman, on his fishing boat, how to fish. That alone is not remarkable. Lots of people who don’t know very much feel perfectly free to tell other people how to do their business. Remarkably to my mind, after protesting, “we’ve been at this all night and haven’t caught anything, but if you say so I’ll do it,” the fisherman does what he’s told. He takes the boat back out to the deep water, he takes the nets which have just been cleaned, and throws them over the side. They sink into the deep. Wham, the nets fill with fish. The nets are breaking, the boat is sinking. And Simon Peter hits his knees at Jesus feet: “Get away from me, I am a sinful man.”

The first words of the 1st disciple were: “I don’t know about that, but ok.” The second words were: “get off my boat, I’m a sinner.” To which Jesus replies, “Stop being afraid, from now on you will be catching people.” The old, favorite way of rendering this in English: From now on, you’ll be fishers of men.

They left everything and followed him. Simon Peter, James, John, then later others. 12 of them called by God in various ways from their lives and livelihoods to follow Jesus around. He would be their rabbi and they would be his disciples, following him, learning from him, and emulating him. This is a big deal. Fishing wasn’t a glamorous profession but it also wasn’t a hobby. This was their livelihood, their identity, their vocation, and they left all it to follow Jesus.

Preachers love this story.

Missionaries love this story.

I’m telling you, we love this story. We who have answered the call of God to go into ministry see ourselves as the faithful hero characters in a narrative of leaving behind a life we had or could have had to follow Jesus. Seminary students ask each other, “how were you called to ministry.” It’s often one of the first questions in an interview for a ministry position: what is your call story? This is something we celebrate and honor—a person’s call story.

One summer in college, I volunteered to be a summer missionary through the Texas Baptists and Baptist Student Union. I requested to be sent to a Boys Ranch in Oklahoma to bail hay for the summer, but instead got assigned to teach English to youth in Brasov, Romania for the summer. I’d never heard of Brasov and probably couldn’t have found Romania on a map at the time. When the time came, I along with dozens maybe a hundred other students from Texas universities prepared to scatter all around the world--everywhere from Romania to Cuba to some poor sucker who was going to bail hay in Oklahoma for the summer. Before we left, we all gathered in a church for a commissioning service. Our families were invited to come. Denominational officials, families, friends, fellow students prayed over us, preached to us, and then had us stand on risers on the stage each holding a candle while Steven Curtis Chapman’s song played over the speakers, “We will surrender it all for the sake of the call.”

*We will abandon it all for the sake of the call*

*No other reason at all but the sake of the call*

*Wholly devoted to live and to die for the sake of the call.*

Rousing. Inspiring. We were the chosen ones—for a summer, the heroes, the true disciples of Christ going to bring good news to a world in need of redemption. Yet, I don’t know if I ‘abandoned’ much of anything except for a summer’s income or playtime or academic progress. Even weighted against those other things I might have done, it felt pretty great. It didn’t feel like abandonment; it felt like a gift. It was a great summer.

Yet, funny thing is, by the next summer I was still working out my sense of call to ministry. I wanted a very different experience and so that summer I got a job working at a chemical plant in Baytown outside of Houston. I spent the summer making polypropylene plastic wearing a hard hat and flame-retardant coveralls that worked by closing its fibers when it encountered heat of any kind. It didn’t know the difference when it was on fire and when it was in Houston in the summer. I was shocked, shocked I tell you, that for that summer no one handed me a candle. No one prayed over me, no one preached a calling for me, no one sang a song for me.

How would that even go:

*We make polypropylene/ to make some money*

*A thermoplastic polymer/ for commodities*

*Use it in diapers, use it in clothes*

*We’ll manufacture it all.*

I mean, it just doesn’t work. No one writes songs for engineers getting up at 5:30 every morning to go to work. You know who else they don’t write songs for:

Teachers grading papers at night. They don’t write songs for them.

Or real estate agents helping people buy homes,

Or waitresses,

Or plumbers, accountants, or computer programmers.

Or government employees. Or lawyers or doctors and such except when compared favorably to being a cowboy.

They don’t have ordination services for those jobs even though Christians are doing those jobs every day and sometimes feel like they are doing the work God made them to do. Sometimes not, and that’s a source of frustration and deep questions. But sometimes yes, and that’s a beautiful thing.

So, I wonder about this: when we talk about discipleship as walking away from your work to follow him, we honor those of us like preachers and missionaries, but where does that leave the rest of you who walk *into* your work as a way of following him? Are you not also disciples of Jesus even if you don’t quit your job, leaving behind your boats and your fish to follow him?

It’s one place where vocational questions intersect with faith commitments. It looks like scripture gives us pretty much one model of being a disciple of Jesus: leaving behind your work, dropping your nets, to follow him around the countryside.

For many centuries in Christian history, to have a vocation was to do something like that: to be a priest, monk, or nun. They were the ones, the only ones, said to have a ‘vocation’. Everyone else was just part of the Christian crowd. But if you were serious about your faith, there was a way of taking your faith seriously: leaving behind your families’ work to become ‘religious’. If that sounds too severe, keep in mind that this era in history followed the era in which if you took your faith seriously, you had a good chance of being martyred for it or knew you could be. So, let’s not be too hasty or too critical. Christians in the early centuries took their faith seriously; they didn’t have a choice.

Along with the Protestant Reformation came a broader understanding of vocation: in the 16th century, Luther among others said, no one should feel compelled to enter a monastery or a convent or be a priest to be faithful. We should stick to where God has put us and serve God there as teachers or smittys or bakers. Luther pointed to a biblical example: shepherds came to Bethlehem to see baby Jesus, and then went back to the fields to take care of their sheep. So, Luther taught, everyone has two vocations: the call to be part of the people of God and the call to a particular line of work. Vocation came to mean your job, done for the glory of God.

The discipleship story reimagined: At Jesus’ command, nets fall in the water. Wham. Fill with fish. They somehow manage to get them to shore, and sell the fish to all the people there who’d come to hear a good sermon and now get fresh fish. Peter makes a mint, falls to his knees and begs Jesus: Don’t leave. I’m a sinner, but I want to be good. Join my crew. Together we’ll fish for fish. Jesus agrees, and becomes part of Peter’s life and his work. He’s a successful businessman with a little help from Jesus. In time he expands his fleet, names his company Solid Rock fishing Company, even puts a little fish sticker on the back of his boats. With Jesus by his side, a human depth finder, Peter stays a fisherman for the rest of his life. In this way of thinking of the meaning of discipleship, fishermen are called to stay fishermen and be great Christian fishermen.

Even though that’s not how the biblical story went, we realized that the simple invitation to true discipleship could grow, shift, and expand to include Christians of all kinds. This is for the good. Most of you are not preachers, pastors, ministers, or missionaries. This can still be your story. You are engineers, and artists, teachers and technicians, you are plumbers and politicians. Some of you need to pick a major and begin your journey; some of you are rethinking the road you’ve travelled and looking for some direction. Even though no one may hand you a candle, maybe we should. You think of your work this way sometimes: what am I called to do, and how can I do it for the glory of God. For some people, answers come easily when we are young. For others, the journey is long and winding and hard.

Living as a disciple of Christ can look pretty different when we come to see it: like St. Francis selling everything he has and leaving behind his father’s wealth. It can look like Thomas Merton leaving behind his identity to enter a monastery and there finding his identity as a writer stayed with him and flourished. Preachers, missionaries . . .for some people, that is God’s call on your life. Thanks be to God. I finally knew for sure that summer working at the plastic plant that I was called to ministry. I joke that it’s because I figured out how hard real work is and wanted no part of it, but the reality is much deeper and more mystical than that.

A life of faithful discipleship can be an ordained ministry, but it can also look very different, ordained in a different way. It can also look like the short, slight Hispanic man who I worked with at the plastic plant that summer. Most of the men I worked with have faded from my memory, but I remember him. I remember that he was different. He didn’t join in the after work strip club trips or the bawdy jokes or the hazing that went on with many of the others. He quietly did his work, spoke softly, smiled easily, and did his work well. He was different just by being who he was: a Christian. His Christianity wasn’t pushed in your face, but when you were ready to escape the nonsense all around you, he was there living a better way every day. There are Christians like him in every line of work, at least I hope there are . . .people like him in every office, in every manufacturing plant, in every field, on every fishing boat, people like that giving solid, faithful witness to the goodness of the Lord, lights shining in darkness.

Robert Hayden wrote a poem that makes me think about people like that man, the true heroes of our faith. Not always the preachers, but you, those of you in the production plants and classrooms, offices and cubicles. Not only those who have dropped their nets and left their boats, but also those who continue providing fish to feed the hungry.

The poem is about his father in the vocation of parenthood, in honor of those who receive no ordination, no laying on of hands, no songs of commissioning, and few thanks, those who live their lives as disciples of Christ in all the ways that humans go about their work shining like the sun; yet unnoticed and unappreciated.

Sundays, too, my father got up early

And put on his clothes in the blue-black cold,

Then with cracked hands that ached

From labor in the weekday weather

Made banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I’d wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking,

When the rooms were warm, he’d call,

And slowly I would rise and dress,

Fearing the chronic angers of that house.

Speaking indifferently to him,

Who had driven out the cold

And polished my good shoes as well.

What did I know, what did I know,

Of love’s austere and lonely offices?

That line from the poem: No one ever thanked him.

So, thank you. For doing what you do. Thank you for doing it how you do it. Thank you for getting up in the morning to jobs you love and putting your whole heart into them and being a witness for Christ. Thank you for going to jobs you hate, and you don’t know how you can take another day, but you call on the strength of the Lord and do it one more day. Thank you for being counter-cultural witnesses in your work places. Thank you for getting up another day when you haven’t done great the day before this and trying again and trusting the grace of God. Thank you. If I could give you a candle and make you stand on the stage and sing to you, I would. You deserve to know that your life and your work is holy and it is ordained by God.

Whether you’ve left your boat for Jesus or whether you’re fishing hard every day to feed your corner of the world, thank you. To be a disciple of Jesus makes you different, but you leave something behind when you do it. What you leave behind is yourself. It’s always yourself, no matter what else you do. What you abandon and leave behind you as you confess “I am a sinner,” as you fall and rise from your knees, as you emerge from the waters of baptism, as you wipe the crumbs of eucharist from your lips, as you do the work God calls you, as you take up your cross, what you abandon is yourself. You aren’t fisherman any longer. Plunged deep into the waters the ship of your life sails, you’re not the fisherman or the ex-fisherman; in the hands of the master, you’re the net.

Holy people, it is with you, and in you bound together, tied together in intricate knots of holy grace, that Jesus Christ still fishes for people. May you have faith to place yourself in his hands to be plunged deep into the waters and raised with new life. Amen.

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