

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 5:1-11

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This story is about the recruitment of Jesus' followers. It is the most elaborate of the call stories in the gospel tradition and in my opinion it's the best one. This is a wonderful story of Jesus getting into Simon's boat and a miraculous catch of fish. Simon and his partners, James and John, are blown away and decide to follow Jesus. Jesus tells Simon that from now on he will be a "catcher of people." This story relates the first time in Simon Peter's life when he met Jesus, when his life forever was changed. It has the dynamic of the recognition of the one who would be Lord of his life, determining his future.

The place of this story in the overall Gospel story is different than in Mark. In Luke there is the initial preaching at Nazareth followed by stories of the man with an unclean spirit, Simon's mother-in-law and the sick of the village, Jesus' prayer and moving on. The call of the disciples follows the story about the Sabbath in Capernaum where Jesus is nearly killed. The verbal similarities between the two stories is an indication that Luke probably learned Mark's stories and then rearranged them in a different order. Luke also recast a significant number of them, including our call story, in which Andrew is not present.

In the background of Luke's story is the story of Elijah calling Elisha in 1 Kings 20. Elijah threw his mantle over Elisha while he was plowing. Elisha immediately recognized what that meant. He said, "Let me go tell my parents and I'll follow you." He sacrificed the oxen that were pulling his plow, and gave the plow away. He left everything and followed Elijah. This happened immediately after Elijah's encounter with God at Mount Horeb.

This is also another story in the miraculous-catch-of-fish tradition. Included in this tradition is the story in John 21, a post-resurrection appearance story, where Jesus tells his disciples to cast their nets on the other side of the boat after having fished all night and catching nothing. They then make a great catch of fish which is how they recognize that it is Jesus on the shore calling to them. These two stories reflect memories of a miraculous event that became a storytelling tradition and different forms of the same story circulated.

At the beginning of Luke's story in chapter 5, Jesus is trying to teach, but the crowd is pressing in on him ("to hear the word of God"). His solution is to get into one of the boats that is there on the shore and to ask the owner to put out a little way from the shore. It is Simon's boat. This part of the story is calm and relatively quiet. It's the story of a teaching day and of Jesus dealing with the enthusiasm of the crowd who wanted to hear his teaching.

After Jesus is finished teaching, he tells Simon to put out into the deep water and let down his nets "for a catch." Jesus' words here are friendly, authoritative, warm. They may imply that he is offering Peter some payment for the use of his boat.

Simon's voice is a voice of skepticism. He was an expert fisherman who had worked all night long for nothing. He is appropriately skeptical, "Teacher, we have fished all night long and caught nothing; but if you say so, we'll let down the nets." Simon was a working man, an entrepreneur who ran his own fishing business. He was strong. So the tone of Peter's voice needs to be that of a strong man who was reluctant to work for nothing.

The catch of fish in the story is sudden and explosive. It is a big, immediate crescendo: "They caught *so* many fish that the nets were starting to *break* and they called their partners in the boat and they came and they filled *both boats!*" It's a big story with an incredible surprise. In telling the story you want to make what happened sound as surprising as possible. It's like a big fish striking your line.

Simon's response is like Moses at the burning bush, *or Isaiah in the temple*. He recognizes that he is in the presence of holiness and he gets down on his knees and tells Jesus, "Get away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man." Simon acknowledges his own unworthiness to be in Jesus presence; he recognizes that he is in the presence of a holy man. He was amazed at the catch of fish, as were his partners, James and John. Jesus' response is calm and strong, "Don't be afraid. From now on you will be catching people."

What I would emphasize in telling this story is to make the catch of fish as big as possible, and then also the extreme of Simon Peter's response of falling on his knees. You might want to kneel down at that point in the story. It's awkward because immediately then you have to get up and tell the part about Jesus. It's easier to point to Peter kneeling down at Jesus, rather than to dramatize it. Another note: Peter falling at Jesus' knees rather than his feet implies that Jesus is sitting in the boat rather than standing.

The call of Simon is a description of his future vocation. James and John and Simon left everything and followed Jesus. This is in the tradition of Elisha who left everything to follow Elijah.

The overall impact of this story is that everyone can identify with Simon. There is more development of Simon's character and his interaction with Jesus here than in any of the other call stories. The experience of unworthiness to be called to follow Jesus is a common experience of the prophets and of the disciples of the prophets. It is the same as Moses and Isaiah. Isaiah in response to his vision says, "Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people with unclean lips." It is that sense of being unworthy and unclean that both Isaiah and Peter experience. The change in Peter is as sudden and extreme as the catch of fish.

Peter's humanity is made more real because of the humor in his skeptical, "smart ass" response to Jesus that is immediately topped by the catch of fish. It may be that Jesus was smiling when he said, "Don't be afraid." This is a story about two guys.

This story is an invitation to identify and share our experiences of being called by God to be part of Jesus mission. It also provides an occasion to issue a call to discipleship. People may experience this story as one that addresses them, in which they encounter Jesus calling them to follow him. You might want to invite people to come forward and acknowledge that sense of call, and make a commitment to follow Jesus. Everyone who hears this story has the possibility that this will be an occasion in which they will experience a sense of being called to become a disciple of Jesus.

Have fun telling the story. It's one of the great stories in the gospel tradition.