

SERMON: If You Say So

TEXT: Luke 5:1-11

Talk about your “big fish” stories, this one ranks right up there with Jonah and the whale. Simon and the others were professional fishermen and they had been out on the lake all night long with not a single fish to show for it. All. Night. Long.

I don't do all-nighters. Maybe once or twice as a teenager at a slumber party. Maybe a couple times in college writing a paper or studying for an exam. Maybe with a sick child or in a crisis call from a church member. I'm neither a night owl nor an early bird. I'm more like a bear, who would hibernate all year long if I could get away with it. So, what happened next would not go over well with me.

What happened to the fishermen was that this wise guy son of a carpenter who's gained a bit of a following comes along and tells them to try again. That's the definition of insanity, you know: Doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. I might have accused him of insanity at that very moment. “Are you insane?! What do you know about fishing, anyway? If there are any fish in that lake, they are too smart for us,

and not interested in being caught.” If they were really bold, they might have confronted Jesus, “What are you trying to prove?”

On the other hand, he had been saying some very wise things about God. It seemed as though he knew God personally. And there was a lot of talk and excitement in town about the miracles he’d been performing. The fishermen had friends in the crowd who seemed to be quite taken with him. Maybe, somehow, Jesus knew something these fishermen did not know – not about fishing, necessarily, but about life, and faith, and serving God. Maybe he was trying to prove something that was beyond their wildest imaginations.

Jesus told Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” I imagine Simon hesitated, but finally answered with a worn down sigh, “If you say so.” Sounds like obedience without enthusiasm. Obligation. Defeat. “We’re not going to get out of this, so let’s get it over with.”

But this small act of relinquishing control resulted in the biggest catch of fish they had ever seen. Their nets began to break, and their boats nearly

sank under the weight. Simon was brought to his knees realizing the miracle he had just seen. Where his expertise had failed, the power of God was victorious. In a way, he was humiliated; he recognized his own unworthiness in the presence of God. With his head bowed in humility, he said, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

Perhaps Simon realized at that point, if only for a moment, that it wasn't about him. It wasn't about success. It wasn't even about a big catch of fish. The question still went unanswered, “What are trying to prove?”

In the church I served in Iowa, there was a 13-year-old girl who summarized this story as a lesson in not giving up. I thought this was pretty insightful for a 13-year-old, and it's not a bad lesson – perseverance. Yet, the more I think about it, the more I realize that's not the point, either. Sure, perseverance is a positive thing, but there are times when we should give up, when we should cut our losses. Of course, when it comes to faith, that's when we should keep on keeping on and never give up. Never give up believing in Jesus; never give up trusting in God.

I think it's interesting – or more like astounding – that Simon and the other fishermen didn't even stick around to reap the benefits of their big catch. They didn't wait for all the congratulations and pats on the back from their friends. They didn't wait for the big payoff they would get at the market for this big catch. They didn't even go home to share the news with their families! At that moment, “They left everything and followed Jesus.”

That's what it's about. Jesus is trying to prove that there are bigger things than a big catch of fish. Bigger than hard work. Bigger than success. Bigger than prosperity. Bigger than popularity. Even bigger than family. Following Jesus is bigger. Trusting God is bigger. God's glory and God's kingdom are bigger than our own glory, our own profit, our own pride, our own life.

I'm not a big football fan, but I have watched enough to know that there are some players who seem to sincerely want to credit God for their success. When a player makes a touchdown, he may get down on one knee and bow his head, genuflect, or do that thing where he hits his chest and then points to heaven as a signal that he is pointing beyond himself to give God the glory.

Whether you are a fisherman or a football player, a janitor or a judge, a lawyer or a laborer, a teacher or a tree trimmer, a celebrity or a secretary, a mechanic or a musician, a student or a senior citizen, it's not about what you do. It's about who you are and to whom you point. It's about your willingness to serve faithfully, to follow obediently, and to trust completely. Even if your doubt is high and your enthusiasm is low and you just want to go back to bed. IF YOU SAY SO.

Louis Pasteur, the pioneer of immunology, lived at a time when thousands of people died each year from rabies. Pasteur had worked for years on a vaccine. Just as he was about to begin experimenting on himself, a 9-year-old boy named Joseph Meister was bitten by a rabid dog. The boy's mother begged Pasteur to experiment on her son. Pasteur injected Joseph for ten days, and the boy lived. Decades later, of all the things Pasteur could have had etched on his headstone, he asked only for three words: "Joseph Meister lived." Even Louis Pasteur knew that his work wasn't about his own success or fame; it was about saving people's lives.

Even as a church, we need to remember that it's not about our own success. One of the best things I ever learned in seminary was something said by a professor who was teaching a class on evangelism. "It's not about success," he said. "It's about faithfulness."

We all want our church to be so full on Sunday morning that the pews are as full of people as those fishermen's nets bursting with fish. But working hard all by itself isn't going to accomplish it. Furthermore, full pews might not be what God desires for this church.

Don't get me wrong. I want to be successful, too. I have wanted to be one of those pastors who can say that the church grew from 50 to 500 in my first five years. But it's entirely possible that God wants something different. Maybe the growth we need is spiritual. Maybe we need to work on growing God's kingdom, sharing God's love, and shining God's light outside these four walls. Unless our purpose lines up with God's purpose, we're going to come up empty.

I read a book awhile back called "Sailboat Church," by Joan Gray, and I've talked about it some with our Session. She contrasts sailboat

churches with rowboat churches, writing: “Rowers are confined to the power they can generate themselves; sailors learn to let the boundless power of the wind move them where they need to go. Sailors live in the creative tension between our weakness and God’s power, between our poverty and the wealth of resources God provides to those who obediently seek to do God’s will. Living between the realities of ‘without me you can do nothing’ and ‘with God all things are possible’ is both humbling and exciting. We are constantly reminded that we are powerless to do the work of Jesus’ church without him. At the same time, we find that the wind of Christ’s Spirit still blows in the world, and as we put up the sails God does amazing things.”

However, being a sailboat church doesn’t mean that there’s no work to be done. It’s just a different kind of activity than rowing. Gray says, “Sailors put up and shift the sails and partner with the wind to move the boat. In the Sailboat church, God and believers work together as partners. In this partnership what we do is important; what God does is essential.”

Remember that Jesus still didn’t let the fishermen go take a nap after their miraculous catch of fish. Instead, he invited them into relationship.

“When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.”

Our job is to be open and available to the Spirit, ready to go wherever God wants to take us, following Jesus every step of the way with an attitude of trust and willingness.

Our Session, along with a few other members, will be participating in a Visioning Retreat this Saturday. Please pray for these leaders, pray for your church, pray for the winds of the Holy Spirit to blow.... To the glory of God!

AMEN.