

The story we've just heard from the Gospel of Luke is one that just won't let me go. There are several tidbits in this story I could dwell on, but I'll mention just three.

First, I'm thinking how cool it is that Jesus is hanging out with – and teaching among – the fishing crowd, and it would seem he's doing so *intentionally*. Think how different this is from what we might expect from a rabbi or, for that matter, clergy in our own day. We tend to hang out with the “church rats,” the folks who come to *us* where *we* are and take meaning in being in a “religious” setting. Instead, Jesus goes where the *people* are. And not just any people – but working people, people who you don't typically associate with “church-goers.”

In fact, if you think about it, it's even more remarkable than that. There was something of a “pecking order” among Jesus' Jewish contemporaries. Rich over poor, of course. Men over women, in most circumstances (though wealth seemed to be of more importance than gender if you look at some of the stories in the Book of Acts). Practically *any* working profession over tanners (the lowest rung because they handled dead animals and animal blood on a regular basis). Shepherds might be a step up from that (because they were mostly hired hands who hung around with smelly livestock... keep this in mind when the Gospel of John portrays Jesus as the “Good Shepherd!”), and, just above that, fishermen. Fishermen weren't as far down the ladder as tanners or shepherds, but they weren't people you'd invite to your Passover parties if you could help it. Early in his ministry, Jesus is out among the fishermen and those trying to buy fresh fish. He is clearly not trying to rub shoulders with the higher-ups of his world.

The second thing is this: Peter, who often didn't “get it” at all, seems to have been the first to recognize that something powerful was at work in the miraculous catch of fish. The fact that he acknowledges his sin in such an extreme manner, falling down at Jesus' feet and such, shows us that he sees God's presence in Jesus and in the miracle. Pretty prescient for a low-on-the-totem-pole fisherman.

There's a wonderful sense of movement in how Luke crafts this story. You have these fishermen (mind you, not recreational fishermen, but professionals), folks whose livelihood was dependent on their catch, who are down on their luck. They fished almost every day except the Sabbath. They were good at what they did. They supported

themselves and their families with the fish they caught, and the people in the villages nearby depended on them to provide fresh fish so they could eat.

Jesus happens upon them on a really bad day. They had fished all night long and, unless Peter was exaggerating, they hadn't caught a single fish. Jesus, who was not a fisherman, gives them advice on how to fish, and for some reason they are willing to take his advice, even though they were exhausted and even though the nets were already washed and ready to put away for the day. Maybe it was because he was a preacher, preaching the word of God. But whatever the reason, they "put out in the deep water" and caught a boatload of fish – in fact, *two* boatloads. They and all who observed were amazed.

Finally, notice the closing of the episode – told entirely without fanfare by the Gospel writer: "Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.' When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him" (*Lk 5:10b-11*). This is the third and final movement in the story. There was such a wonderful sense of joy in all of this. They had no hesitation at all about leaving their life, their livelihood, to do the thing Jesus was calling them to do.

It brings to mind Francis of Assisi, who, like these fishermen, left everything he had known (in his case, his family's wealth) to give himself fully to serving God, depending entirely on God to supply his needs. Eventually, we are told, he tossed aside his very clothing, and set out to, as he put it, "marry Lady Poverty." He and those who joined with him were mendicant friars; they begged for their daily needs (even at church doors!), and all else they received they gave to the poor. Francis eventually also gave himself to caring for lepers. He left behind his father's substantial wealth to serve God in this extraordinary manner.

History abounds with examples of people who did what Jesus did, who did what the disciples did, who did what Francis did. Within the last century, there are a number of such examples, but I'll share with you just this one.

Clarence Jordan was a Georgia man who was troubled by the racism and economic injustice that he saw all around him. He first thought he could best try to change this by being a good example to those around him in his native world, the world of agriculture. He would be a good farmer, a different kind of farmer from those he saw exploiting people of color all around him. He went to school, earned a degree in agriculture, and graduated in 1933.

By the time the degree was complete, though, he had begun to realize that something was missing from this vision of his. There was something in the spiritual realm he needed to call upon to change these prejudices and hatreds effectively. So he went to seminary and devoted himself to what he saw as a prophetic, pastoral call.

Soon after the completion of his seminary degree, he and his wife, along with another couple, founded *Koinonia Farms* in Americus, Georgia. Remember now, this was Georgia, the Deep South, in the late 1930s. What he and his companions founded was an interracial farming commune, in which all people were treated as equals. You can imagine that Jordan never made a fraction of the money he would have made had he gone out to pastor a big steeple church with his doctorate in Greek New Testament. But he was doing what God was calling him to do. He stopped farming just to make a living – and started “farming for people.” Many important programs were begun out of the *Koinonia* community; perhaps the most noted and vibrant continues to this day: *Habitat for Humanity*.

Up to the moment of Jesus’ challenge to them, from all indications, the fishermen had been mostly concerned with fishing for fish – and almost instantaneously, as a result of a single encounter with Jesus, they changed their focus. They didn’t stop fishing for fish altogether any more than Jesus left behind carpentry altogether, or Clarence Jordan left behind farming. But the focus now would be on trying to help people open themselves, awaken themselves to the presence of God within them. That is what fishing for people is all about; it’s certainly not about how many human fish we can catch.

I wonder: Where might Jesus be calling me and you? What kind of fishing, farming, carpentry, whatever, can we turn to a whole new purpose for Christ? My guess is, there are possibilities here. And it’s my prayer that we will find and follow them.