

Jesus Calls Disciples

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Luke 5:1-11

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

ICHTHUS is both the Greek word for fish and an acrostic for Jesus.

Fish are ancient Christian symbols. Christians were a persecuted minority for their first 300 years. Jesus' followers had to be careful about making their Christian allegiance public, with so many informants around spying for the Roman government. If you came upon someone you thought to be a believer, you would make an arc of a fish in the sand. The other person would complete the fish outline by making the other arc in the sand, letting you know he or she could be trusted as a fellow believer.

The sign of the fish is the equivalent of a secret handshake. When I joined a college fraternity, I was taught a secret handshake as part of my initiation. I would show it to you, but, then again, it's a secret.

Some Christians display fish symbols on their cars. Sometimes you see the letters ICHTHUS printed inside this fish symbol. ICHTHUS is both the Greek word for fish and an acrostic for Jesus. Iota is the first letter in the Greek word for Jesus. Chi is the first letter in the Greek word for Christ. Theta is the first letter in the Greek word for God. Upsilon is the first letter in the Greek word for Son. Sigma is the first letter in the Greek word for Savior. So, literally, ICHTHUS is an acrostic meaning Jesus, Christ, God, Son,

Savior or alternatively Jesus Christ, the Son of God [is] Savior.

In the early 1980s, Chris Gilman, who works for a company that makes props and costumes for Hollywood, came up with a parody of the Christian fish symbol. Gilman put feet on the fish (the feet are supposed to resemble Charles Darwin's feet). Gilman also substituted the words ICHTHUS with DARWIN.

You could say the Scopes trial never really ended. It's now being played out on car bumpers. Darwin fish symbol drivers pitted against Christian fish symbol drivers. A University of Georgia professor actually researched this Darwin fish phenomenon and determined that most of the people who sport a Darwin fish symbol do it either to ridicule Christians or to express their fondness for natural selection.

Christians adopted the fish symbol for another reason, contained within our Luke 5 story. It will become clear as our story unfolds.

Jesus meets three fishermen who are ready to call it quits after a worthless night of fishing (5:5). Jesus instructs Peter to resume fishing (5:4). Peter is dubious about the prospects of catching fish in broad daylight but does it anyway (5:5). Peter proceeds to catch an unprecedented number of fish, so much so that the net nearly breaks under the weight of the fish (5:6-7).

“You catch them, I’ll clean them” Jesus says.

Peter feels unworthy to be in the presence of someone who exercises total mastery over the sea and asks Jesus to leave (5:8). Jesus, in response, transforms this fishing miracle into an object lesson about an altogether different kind of fishing. “From now on,” Jesus tells them, “you will be catching people” (5:10). Early Christians employed the fish symbol on account of Jesus’ directive that their new mission would be fishing for people.

Jesus’ call to “catch people” has, for the longest time, made me uncomfortable. For starters, I’m not big into fishing. As a kid, I despised the grim process of putting a wiggly worm on a hook. I knew it was about the fish and not the worm, but I couldn’t help feeling sorry for the worm. Some of you will think I’m a wimp but, as a kid, I didn’t see it as catching fish but drowning worms!

Fishing is deliberately deceptive. That’s why fishermen entice fish with bait and lure. What looks like a free meal to a fish is actually a set up.

Jesus isn’t implying that we hoodwink people into believing; baiting them with unrealistic promises that can never be fulfilled. The Greek word for catching people means to catch alive rather than to catch in such a way that injures or kills. Catching people is not meant to be predatory, but redemptive. We do not catch with a desire to kill or harm. Our mission entails rescuing people.

Let me take you back to God’s Big Story of creation, fall and redemption. Jesus Christ offers redemption to people. Jesus Christ is on a search and rescue operation. He wants to accomplish this mission through his disciples.

“From now on you will catch people.” Our job is catching people, not cleaning them. We introduce people to Jesus Christ. He does the rest! “You catch them, I’ll clean them” Jesus says.

These three fishermen, Peter, James and John, comprise the inner core of Jesus’ disciples. This trio is privy to Jesus’ transfiguration (the subject of next Sunday’s sermon) and accompanies him on the fateful night Jesus wrestles with his impending suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus calls, equips and sends these three fishermen together to fish for people. He never sends them out alone. He always sends them out two-by-two. The Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, literally means “the called-out ones.” We are not called alone; we are called together. That’s why we focus so much on small groups in this church. If you think you can go it alone, with all due respect, you’re delusional!

The famous evangelist D. L. Moody was visiting a prominent Chicago citizen when the subject of church involvement surfaced. “I can be just as good a Christian outside the church as I can be inside it,” the man said. Moody said nothing. Instead, he moved to the blazing hot fireplace, removed a burning coal

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and placed it over to one side. The two men sat together and watched the ember die out. Moody's point struck home. We can be better Christians together than we can be alone. When we separate, the fire dies.

James and John are not identified by name until the end of this story (5:10). Clearly, Peter is the focus of this lesson. Peter's given name is Simon, but Jesus gives him a new name to match his new identity. "You are Simon, son of John. You are to be called Cephas," which is translated Peter (John 1:42).

Peter is the Greek word for rock, but Peter is anything but a rock. He is impulsive, volatile and unreliable. When Jesus asks the all-important question, "Who do people say that I am?" (Mark 8:27), his disciples mutter something about Jesus being John the Baptist or Elijah the prophet. Peter, however, nails it: "You are the Messiah" (8:29). Yet, when Jesus speaks about his impending suffering, death and resurrection, Peter takes Jesus aside to rebuke him—You can't be talking this way, Jesus. You're gonna' get us all killed. Jesus, in turn, offers a stinging rebuke of his own: "Get behind me, Satan" (8:33).

Fast forward to the last supper Jesus shares with his disciples, an event dramatized in Holy Communion. Jesus is seated at a table with his disciples and revisits this matter of his impending sacrifice. Peter suddenly blurts out, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death" (Luke 22:33). You

might think Jesus would say something complementary to Peter—At-a-boy, Peter, now you're getting it. Jesus instead announces those fateful words, "I tell you Peter, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times" (8:33). Sure enough, Peter denies any association with Jesus three times in a span of several hours.

I've been reading lately the history of the early church in the book of Acts. Peter clearly emerges in Acts as the primary spokesman for the church. It's upon Peter's confession that Jesus builds his church. Something changes these rather ordinary disciples into bold witnesses for Jesus Christ.

I'm intrigued with the people Jesus chooses for his disciples. In Luke 5, Jesus calls three no-name fishermen and, later in the chapter, a reviled tax collector into his core leadership. The entire list of the 12 disciples in Luke 6:14-16 includes nobody special. Jesus invites a strange menagerie to join his ranks. It's a rather odd assortment of common, ordinary people.

The people that Jesus handpicks to be his 12 seem universally to be the wrong people. It's almost as if Jesus goes out of his way to pick ordinary, unexceptional people. There's not a single religious professional among the 12. They're all people with day jobs. There are no scholars or wealthy benefactors among hand-picked disciples.

Maybe Jesus likes the challenge of making something out of nothing. Perhaps he prefers working with unpromising recruits to demonstrate that the power belongs to God and

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not to us. Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians that most of Jesus' initial followers are nobody special. "...not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were influential, not many were of noble birth. God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise and the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (1 Corinthians 1:26-27).

Don't let the ordinariness of Jesus' disciples disappoint or discourage you. Their ordinariness ought to give us hope. Jesus can take ordinary people and make something beautiful for God.

The people Jesus calls to become his disciples tells us more about the caller than the called. It has been said, "God doesn't call the qualified; God qualifies the called."

Our church's mission statement can be summarized in three memorable words: call, equip and send. But before we can be equipped and sent out, we must answer the call. How is God calling you?

What do you do if someone calls you? You answer the call! Unless, of course, you don't recognize the person on caller ID. Caller ID gives us the ability to screen our calls. Maybe that's the problem. You don't have God on caller ID. God is calling, but you misread this call as longings for human affection or material gain. The speaker at our men's Steak Out on Friday talked about our infatuation with beauty, brains and bucks. But the longings of our soul

cannot be satisfied by such things. They can only be satisfied with God.

