

Dropping Our Nets

Matthew 4:12-23

Jennie Ott ☩ First Congregational Church of Minnesota UCC ☩ 27 January 2008
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Last week I was in the Caribbean with my family. Here is what I should have packed:

- A bathing suit
- A couple pairs of shorts
- Several shirts
- A pair of sandals
- Sunblock – SPF 30 – for my fair skin
- And a couple books

Here is what I actually packed:

- All of that stuff, plus
- A nice pair of pants, in case we went out
- A nice skirt, in case we went out and it was someplace dressy
- An extra pair of sandals to go with the nice skirt
- A windbreaker, in case it rained
- Tennis shoes, in case I wanted to go for a run
- Running socks to go with the shoes, in case I wanted to go for a run
- 30 sunblock spray, in case I want to go to the beach when no one was around to rub it on my back
- And a couple more books, in case I got through those first two.

Needless to say, it made for a lot of baggage. But I like to be prepared, and it's nice to anticipate what's coming. I like to think packing that way shows foresight and good planning.

It's this part of my personality, then, that is most intrigued by this story in the gospel of Matthew, and what seems to be a complete lack of forethought.

Peter and Andrew are minding their own business, going about their day, just like any other day, knee deep in the blue water, casting their nets into the sea, pulling up fish to sell in the market.

Maybe they were recounting stories of their family dinners the night before, maybe working quietly side by side, but suddenly a man approaches them along the shoreline.

"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

What a strange pick-up line Jesus uses, but it works. As both Matthew and Mark tell the story, the fisherman just drop their nets and go.

There is no foresight here,
no "let me go check with my wife,"
no "let me see if someone can cover for me at work"
no "let me run and get some extra sandals and sunscreen."
They just turn and go, following this man they had never met before.

This is an outrage to my practical and responsible sensibilities.

The gospels talk of Peter's mother-in-law, so we know he had a wife – certainly she must of had some thoughts about this. What about her? And what about his family? When he drops his nets, he drops his livelihood, his income, his provisions for his family. Where's the responsibility in that?

It's a similar scene for James and John, who are sitting offshore a couple boats down. They respond to Jesus' call in such a way that they abandon their boat and their dad right then and there. Now their dad is left to deal with the day's catch and running the family business. Where is the forethought? The consideration of others?

But I suppose with the outrage, there's perhaps a twinge of jealousy, too.

I've spent the past four or five years talking about call, writing about call, trying to discern my own call, engaging others about their calls, and I know of no call stories like these. I know no one who heard God's call and dropped everything to do it. Most people I know have wondered, explored, talked with their families, prayed, and tried a lot of other things first.

After all, it is the sensible thing to do.

But there's something appealing about their seemingly reckless abandon, in the way that they just throw down their nets and follow their hearts.

What was it that made them do it?

Were they tired of being fisherman and looking for a change?

Was this some sort of midlife crisis?

Or was there something about Jesus? Something in his voice? Something in the way he looked at them?

How did they know he was trustworthy?

We have the advantage of knowing the whole story. We know what was ahead for them – the traveling, the sitting on hillsides listening to Jesus, the healing that they would do in towns around Judea and Galilee, the world's need that would come and lay itself at their feet, the way people would both worship them and revile them all at once.

They had no idea what was coming. And yet, it didn't matter. It was a call they could not ignore.

I want to shout out, "impractical" and "irresponsible," and yet there is part of me that wishes I had the guts to be like them... to drop and go with abandon. I wish I was more inclined to throw caution to the wind and just do it, because I am so compelled and because I am so intrigued by the one who is calling me.

That's what I want, but there is often this practical voice in my head saying, "Just keep to your nets, rather than risking what you might lose."

I've only fished with a net once, on a sixth grade field trip, so I must admit I'm much more familiar with other kinds of nets. Like the ones at the circus, under the acrobats. The safety nets.

I like safety nets.

I have quite a number of them myself.

These are the things that I think will protect me, the things I never want to be without, the things that I'm sure are supporting my livelihood and my well-being.

There are the tangible ones, like my suitcase in the Caribbean or the trunk of my car, which looks like I robbed a hardware store in preparation for a winter emergency.

Then there are the financial safety nets. My savings account. A 401K. A 403b. A Roth IRA. A couple bonds.

There are policy safety nets. Health insurance, car insurance, renters insurance are what I carry now, which means I currently lack dental, vision, life, homeowner, earthquake, yacht, pet, long-term healthcare insurance, as well as short-term and long-term disability.

And then there are my favorite safety nets...my favorite only because this is where I spend so much of my time...the abstract safety nets, which for me most often express themselves in needs:

The need to be liked.

The need to take care of things myself.

The need to please everybody, all the time.

Some of my safety nets really are my own doing, but some of these are the result of things society says I need. There are so many ways that the world tempts us into false senses of security.

My problem is I spend so much time fussing with these nets that I just get tangled up in them. I think they're here for my protection, but instead they end up pulling me down. And then when the call comes, I have a hard time extracting myself from them, much less laying them down.

"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people," Jesus says to those disciples. Come into relationship with me, and then I will show you how to use your gifts in a new way. Abide in me, and I will give you adventures you never thought possible.

This story is not rational, not sensible, which makes me think I might be looking at it with the wrong lens. Maybe this is just a good old-fashioned love story. A love at first sight, where Peter, Andrew, James, and John met this man and all sensibility went out the window, because here was someone so intriguing and so tuned into who they were, that they just had to say yes.

And love, as we know, can make us do very strange things.

I saw a wonderful quote the other day. It was on a greeting card, so I bought it and will put it in my office. It says this:

"Remember, God does not call the equipped, God equips the called."

The fishermen seemed to have realized that. They could leave their equipment behind. They didn't need to know what was going to happen. They didn't need to have their route all mapped out, their suitcase packed for any possibility. They were connected to the one who called them, and that was enough.

A pastor from Connecticut tells this great story from his childhood. He and his two brothers were out fishing with their dad, when partway across the lake the engine fell off the back of their boat and proceeded to sink to the bottom of the lake. The dad, in his wisdom, tapped the eldest brother on the shoulder and handed him a rope.

"Tie this around your waist. Then dive down and see if you can find the motor. When you do, give the rope a quick tug, and we'll pull you up."

So down the brother went, while the dad and the brothers waited. He came up for air, dove down again and pretty soon, there was a tug on the line. The dad and brothers started pulling, until finally the eldest brother came bubbling up to the service, covered in mud and clutching the engine to his chest.

After he got back in the boat and dried off, the pastor asked his brother, “Weren’t you scared going down there?”

“No,” he said, “because I knew who was holding the other end of the rope.”

The call of God invites us to jump out of the boat. The call of God invites us to drop our nets, and it’s not without risk. To unclench the fist that clutches our assurances is a real challenge. But there on the shore, God is waiting, and that’s where the real safety is.

What are your nets?

What things capture you and keep you from being in relationship with God?

Can you hear the love song coming to you across the water?

These fisherman, in their reckless abandon, got something right. Being called doesn’t always mean being well-prepared, or practical, or responsible, or safe. Like faith itself, being called means being open to vulnerability, risk, abandon, and most of all – trust.

Will we put down our nets? I think someone approaches on our shores.

Amen.