

Reset: Priorities
Luke 5: 1-11
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Trinity United Methodist Church
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A woman was sitting next to an empty seat at the Super Bowl stadium. A man asked the woman about it. The woman explained, "It was my husband's... but he died." The man said to her, "I'm surprised that another relative or friend didn't jump at the chance to take his seat." She answered, "I don't understand it either. But they all decided it was more important to go to his funeral."

I won't quit my day job, but this joke about priorities and the Super Bowl was too good to pass up. We all know we have to reset our priorities once in a while. Sometimes life does it for us. A crisis, a death, the loss of a job, a change in relationship, a new baby, retirement – lots of things make us think about what's important and force us to make adjustments to our time, our money, and our attitudes, in other words, our priorities. We seek, as followers of Jesus, to put him first, to make him the center of our lives, the focus around which everything else revolves.

At some point, however, a little tweaking isn't going to cut it. Setting priorities is like buttoning a shirt. If you get the top one buttoned in the wrong hole, none of the rest will ever line up. If we get the top one buttoned right, the rest aren't a guarantee, but it is at least possible that they will fall into place.

I read the story in Luke 5 with interest because Simon's call involves the kind of shift of focus that I think resetting our priorities is all about. To really understand it, let's start at the end. Up to this point, as far as we can tell, Simon Peter's priority, his focus, has been fishing. We don't know anything else about him. In verses 10 and 11, Jesus gives him a new priority, a new main purpose. What is it? Fishing for people. Gathering in people (it's not line fishing, after all, but giant nets collecting many, many fish of all kinds). Jesus says to Peter, in effect, 'You catch 'em, I'll clean up. From now on.'

As a church, we say that making followers of Jesus is our priority, our focus, job one. You've noticed in the announcement slides each week that we end with 'growing in God, growing together, and growing in service.' Those 3Gs, though, are the 'how to.' We realized as I prepared for this sermon that the 'what' has been missing. Our focus, our aim, is to 'make followers of Jesus to change the world.' Jesus' call to Peter, then, is the call to us as well.

Jesus puts it in several different ways throughout the Gospels. "Love the lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself." In Matthew 28, "Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." All are ways of saying the same thing. Follow Jesus, and help others do the same thing.

I have never questioned that being the mission of the church. What is mind-blowing to me is to think of ‘making followers of Jesus to change the world’ or being a ‘fisher for people’ as MY reason for being, my main priority.

I may also be a pastor, or a mom, a wife, a dog-lover, and someone who tutors kids in schools. But my main purpose in all of them is to draw people into following Jesus.

Randy Rhoads, Trinity’s administrator, was crunching numbers in his office this past week. I stopped by to chat for a minute, apologizing for interrupting him. “Lore,” he said, “Crunching numbers for me is like a warm comforter on a cold day.” In fact, he went on to confess, if we would put 4-digit numbers on everyone’s nametag, he would easily be able to remember and identify everyone! It’s names that give him a struggle.

Randy loves numbers! If he loved numbers more than making disciples for Jesus, that might be a problem. Jesus intends for working with numbers to be one of the tools Randy uses to bring others to him. I see him living out his purpose on a daily basis in so many ways.

Do you think of following Jesus and helping others follow him as your reason for being? Your center? Your call?

The story of Peter’s call ends with “You will be fishing for people,’ but it doesn’t start there. Before Peter can become a fisherman for people, he has to get caught himself. We follow, and then we can help others get on board. First, we follow ourselves.

So we go back to the beginning of the passage. Verses 1-4. The second thing I notice is the urgency in this section, how anxious Jesus is to get started. Fishermen in Galilee go out in the wee small hours of the morning, after midnight, to begin their day. They work all night and come in when the boat is full or the sun is up, whichever comes first. Then they sort the catch and clean and mend their nets for the next day. Tiring work, and this day Luke describes, they have caught nothing. All that work, no income. All that effort, and nothing to show for it.

Have you ever had a day like that? What was going through your mind at the end of it? It is at this point that Jesus engages Peter, eventually suggesting that they go fishing! There is an urgency to this, a ‘we have to go now’ aspect that I never noticed before. Fishing for people is so important, it has to be done even though Peter might not be ready for it.

This urgency is something we mainliners sometimes lose. Our more evangelical brothers and sisters get it. They are afraid people are going to hell if they don’t say the sinner’s prayer and get right into a personal relationship with Jesus. We mainliners are sometimes so busy letting everyone know the phrase ‘personal relationship with Jesus’ isn’t in the Bible, and that hell isn’t just a destination for after you die, that we miss how important it is to call people to Jesus in the first place.

It’s even MORE urgent for us, because we believe hell is not merely a post-mortem destination, it is a way of life while people walk on the earth. There are hellish ways and heavenly ways, and

my path affects everyone who walks with me in this life. It is urgent that people get on the right path, not just so they live after they die, but so they can live now. Getting that top button in place is crucial, urgent. It matters so much. Nothing else will work until we get it in place, start following Jesus ourselves, make it the top button, the first thing. But when we do, all sorts of other things fall into line with God's plan, including the care of the people we love and of creation.

The third thing I notice is that this resetting of Simon Peter's priorities, and ours, involves surrender. And there are stages to it, it takes a bit of time.

First, in verse 5. It's crazy, from Peter's point of view. He knows fishing. He knows the fish are just not where they ought to be. What does a carpenter/preacher from Nazareth (not even on the lake) know about fishing? But he says, "ok, but because it's you asking, I'll go." The first surrender is to do what Jesus asks, even though it might not make immediate sense to us.

Then, in the boat, what happens? So many fish the nets tear, other boats are required, and these men are overwhelmed. Turns out the Nazarene carpenter knows a thing or two about fishing after all. So much, in fact, it seems he might actually be in control of the fish. Another surrender occurs, as Peter falls to his knees in the midst of the miracle (and the fish) and admits he is not worthy to be in the presence of such a power.

Finally, the surrender is confirmed in verse 11. They leave the tools of their trade behind to answer this call to follow. They don't have all the answers, and no guarantees except they'll be able to do what they are called to do. Yet they leave behind some pretty important things, everything their lives revolved around before, and go with Jesus.

We do have to leave some things behind. Some attitudes, some other priorities, some possessions, some misunderstandings, some ways of thinking. I don't know what that will look like for you, but I can tell you what it looks like for me.

I had a co-worker once who drove me crazy. Have you ever worked with someone who drives you crazy? He was arrogant, self-absorbed, and in general a pain in my backside. I could never do anything right, and when I would try to talk to him about it, it would always end up being my fault. Day by day, it got worse, my attitude got worse, and my anger level soared. One day on the way home from work, I was praying about it, complaining to God. I heard myself say, "I just hate him."

It stopped me cold. Had I just said that? Me? I'm a nice person! I love everyone! Don't I? But I realized I did not. I really did hate the guy. What's more, I knew that I had reached another point of decision, a surrender, a leaving behind. If I wanted to follow Jesus, the Jesus who said, "Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you," I was going to have to do something radical. Unbutton all of it, and start again.

So my prayer was, "Help me to love him. Help me to care. I don't want to hate. Bless him, bless his work. Please help me." I'd love to say there was a heavenly choir at that point, shining

down glory all around and I suddenly changed. No. What did happen was, gradually, over the next few weeks as I continued to choose to follow Jesus, I noticed things that were good about my co-worker. I started seeing reasons for his behavior. And Jesus showed me a few uncomfortable truths about myself, places where I maybe was the arrogant, rigid, self-absorbed person. I can honestly say now that I love this guy as much as I love a member of my family. I still think he's nuts, but I love him!

That surrender, that decision to follow, is not the first. It won't be the last. Peter will fail again too, you know? Read the gospels, and you find him failing in a big way as he denies Jesus. He will have other frustrating days; read Acts as he has his vision adjusted. However, there is a difference now.

Craig Starkweather, in our choir, pointed out to me that sometimes what makes the difference between a good time and a bad time is who you are with. I think that is true of Peter. This call to follow on the shores of Galilee is the moment when Peter put the top button in place. He will fail again, fall again, but he will never again be without Jesus. Jesus is the one who helps us keep it in order, put the mission into its rightful place at the top of our priority list. He's the one that helps us unbutton and re-button.

Isn't that why we're here? Isn't that why we worship, sing the songs, hear the Scriptures, take communion? Because we know we need help, because we want him to re-set us, get that top button in place, we need to be reminded that the heavenly way is not some set of rules that we are doomed to break. It is a Person, Jesus, who wants us to succeed and will continue to reset us until we are, at last, with him forever.