

“More Than Your Job”  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
Third Sunday after Epiphany  
Edina Morningside Community Church; January 22, 2017

**Luke 5:1-11**

*Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. 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.*

Do I remember how it happened? Of course! Could I forget the moment that changed my entire life? It was in the morning, at the end of a long night. James and John in one boat, and my father and I in the other. We were out from sundown to sunup, every night. Fishing is best in the dark. The day’s too hot, and your shadows will spook the fish. But of course you know that.

Well that night the hours passed by so slowly. We moved around from place to place trying to find where the fish were at, but our nets just dragged through empty water. My hands got tired of holding all that rope—pulling in and pushing out. It’s rough on your knees and back too. We were still young men; I don’t know how my father did it for so long.

That was a long night, and we were glad to be done come morning. We rowed the boats back to shore and hauled them up on the beach. They are a pretty good size, you know, and heavy. As big as this altar area, and about as deep as where I’m standing. They can hold plenty of fish (if you catch fish). We had climbed out, and were cleaning the seaweed out of the nets. Fixing knots that had pulled loose, patching holes, that sort of thing. I was so tired, just looking forward to going home to my wife. Do you know the hollowed-out exhaustion that comes from working forever-long hours, yet with nothing meaningful to show for it?

Then, all of a sudden, here comes a big commotion. This preacher guy with a crowd of people all around him. (There were always so many people—he had that effect. I wasn’t used to it, and it made me a bit uneasy. You don’t see many people when you’re on the water.) Even then, I knew it was Jesus. Everyone talked about him. But this was the first chance I had to *hear* what he had to say. It was nice to listen while we were finishing up—there was no radio or anything in those days. And he was *good*. His words had a shimmery quality, like the sun glinting off a fish in the water. I felt giddy, almost drunk, listening to him. What he said seemed so *right*.

It’s no surprise that even more people showed up. I was really getting uncomfortable with the squeezing-in crowd. Before I knew what was happening, Jesus came around the boat and surprised me. He wanted to take *our* boat out on the water. He asked me to row so he could teach: “Uhh...uhh....uhhh.... okay.” We put the nets back into the boat—can’t trust people walking on them—and shoved off again. I wasn’t sure I wanted to be this close to him. I like to stay a little more in the background. I couldn’t talk to this many people back then. You all are a scary-big crowd!

So I rowed out a little bit and tried to keep the boat still. His voice carried a long way on the flat water. We were quiet, listening to him talk about God’s kingdom, and peace, and love. Working for God sounded

really tough. Being a disciple meant risking everything we ever knew. But if we took the risks and laid it all out in a life-giving way, then love and joy would start to appear. God would use our actions and make them so much bigger, he said. The kingdom of God would break out.

Risk everything, win everything. It's like what happens sometimes in your games. One footballer runs a long way forward, farther, farther. Someone else throws it far, far ahead to them. If it works, it works!—big reward. But you must risk it all.

When he finished talking, Jesus looked at me. I asked him: "Ready to go back?" "No, not yet," he replied. "Go out there, out to the deep waters. Go put your nets down there. See what you get."

Can I confess that I didn't have the kindest reply in my head? What could Jesus know about *my* job? I thought: "You're a silver-tongued preacher, sure. But you're a *carpenter* from *Nazareth*. What do you know about fishing? Don't tell me how to do my job!" Besides, I was still tired from the work, and I told him so. "We've *been* out there fishing, all night. You can see what we caught—nothing!"

But his preaching caught in my heart. I wondered if what he said could be true. Could I risk further exhaustion and the shame of failure in front of so many people? Would there be anything to show for it? "If you say so, I'll let down the nets." He pointed the direction and I rowed. We were going deep.

Have *you* ever been in truly deep water? It's scary. If anything happens out there, you're a long way from shore. Big storms come up fast, and the waves can make even me seasick. The waters beneath you just go down and down further. It's dark—the sunlight doesn't get near the bottom. You can't see, and you have no idea what's down there: sea creatures of every kind, the uncertainty, the unknown. We were over the deep when I put out the nets.

Immediately, there were fish everywhere! I couldn't figure out where they were all coming from—I've never seen a catch like that! They were practically throwing themselves at the boat: suicide fish, trying to bury us with their bodies. We started to drown in fish! "James! John! Get out here!" I yelled. They saw what was going on, and rowed out as fast as they could. Together we pulled on the nets, trying to get them from the water, but they were tearing with the strain. Fish flopped from net into hull, until both our boats were swamped and nearly underwater in the deep. I saw in that moment what Jesus was talking about. God's ways lead to unimagined abundance, but they'll change forever the life you have always known. Jesus called me to see that this life is about more than my job. He led me into the deep water to show what's possible when every part of life—including the work for daily bread—becomes suffused with trust in him. What power, what hope, and what joy await when we turn the corner from existence to servant obedience?

Of course, it's not easy—it only seems so after we've walked in the way for a while. Going with Jesus cost me both livelihood and relationships, even as it opened me up to something altogether more. When we got the boats back to shore, we had to push them hard up onto the beach. Fish were spilling out of the shredded nets, flopping on the ground. As I started walking away, everything just lay there behind me. The boat had been my full-time job for my whole life. It was my livelihood and my habits. I spent all my time patching it up and working on it. It connected me to my family of fishers, my friends in the community. That boat was my life, everything I thought was important. Everything I had been working on, all my ambitions. Those nets I was leaving had supported my life. They were comfort, strength, everything I knew. They meant food and money. Where would that come from now? I didn't know, but I had to go with him in trust, or the future would have the same scarcity of the long night that had passed.

Your call may not ask you to leave behind everything you know and love. Indeed, you may be called deeper into it, taking the risk of loving more, serving more, listening more, and imagining more. But whatever you do—working and playing, eating and sleeping, joining and journeying, loving and dreaming, protesting and serving—trust the deep waters of divine daring. Take it from me: The God of *limitless* possibilities will meet you there. Let us pray: *Seeking God, grant us ears to hear your call, hearts to trust your love, and wills to follow You in faith. Amen.*