



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

August 17, 2014

After Surrender

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: August 27, 2014

Luke 5:1-11

Listening to a biblical text can be like listening to another person. Sometimes when we are listening to another person, all we hear are the words. We are not paying much attention. We just hear the words, the words flowing along. Sometimes when we hear a biblical text we just hear the words. We do not notice much else, just the words. Then there are those times when we listen to another person carefully and closely. We hear the words, but we also pay attention to such things as the tone of voice, the expression on the person's face, their eyes, the posture, their body language, and whether they are tense as they are speaking or relaxed or something else. Now we are really listening. It can be the same with a biblical text. We hear the words but we also begin to imagine: we imagine tone of voice, we imagine the interactions among the people, and we may even imagine the looks on their faces, their eyes, their body language and whether or not they are tense or relaxed or something else.

For instance, what do you think the words Peter says to Jesus when Jesus asked him to go back out with his boat and his net and fish sounded like?

I think if you put your ear to these words you will hear fatigue, frustration, and even anger. You hear it in the words of Peter. Peter, James and John have been out fishing. The text says they have been fishing all night. They are not yet disciples of Jesus. They are partners in a fishing business. This is how they earn their living. They are not sport fishermen. They fish to feed themselves. They fish to feed their families. If they are lucky and have a good catch, they can feed themselves and their families and sell the rest of the fish. So here are the three men. It is morning. They

were out all night. They caught nothing. They have nothing. Now they must do the work of cleaning their nets. Cleaning the nets was always work but it must have been easier work after a good catch.

Now Jesus shows up. Jesus comes to these men on this morning when they have had a long and discouraging night. Jesus comes to these men with a crowd of people following him. Just what you want when you have had a bad night.

Jesus comes up to Peter and asks Peter to take him out a little way from shore so he can speak to this crowd. Peter, maybe grateful for a break in cleaning the nets, gets into his boat and rows Jesus out a little way from shore. Jesus then begins to teach the crowd. The text does not say how long this went on. Remember Peter has been out all night.

Then, when the teaching is over, Jesus says to Peter, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." This is where the sound of fatigue, frustration and maybe anger enters the text. Peter and his partners were out there all night. They have been there. What does this obviously remarkable teacher and carpenter know about fishing? Peter says, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing..." Now before reading on, just listen to those words. Imagine the tone of Peter's voice. I do not think it sounded like Peter was saying, "Anything you want Jesus." I do not think it sounded like Peter was saying, "Sure thing Jesus, Jesus, you the man. Let's do this!" I think it sounded more like, "Jesus, really, you want me to go back out there where I was all night?"

Peter is at a low point. One bad night does not make a bad life but it was surely a reminder of how hard and fickle his life could be. Jesus has caught Peter at a bad time. This seems to be something that Jesus did regularly. He would come upon people as they struggled. He would show up when their lives were not going well. Jesus spent a lot of time by himself in prayer. Jesus spent a lot of time with his disciples. Jesus had friends and supporters who lived comfortable lives, like the person who let him use a private garden, the garden of gethsemane. But Jesus spend a lot of his time, a great deal of time, with people who were tired, frustrated, and maybe angry about life.

Jesus came to Peter when Peter was like that. Jesus came to a lot of people when they were like that. Sometimes, that is when he comes to us.

II

Now listen to the rest of what Peter says, “Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” Peter is willing. It is important to name what Peter is doing here. Peter is surrendering. He is surrendering to Jesus. “Surrender” may seem like too heavy a word. Surrender is also an unpleasant, offensive word. It suggests being defeated, being conquered and raising a white flag. But spiritually, surrender is quite different. It is difficult, but it is necessary. Peter is surrendering in the sense that he is saying to Jesus he will let Jesus tell him what to do. He will give over his will and his ego to Jesus. He will give over his fatigue, frustration, and anger. Instead of using them as an escape, Peter turns them over to Jesus.

It is like what we pray in the Lord’s Prayer when we pray, “Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it

is in heaven.” When we pray that and pray it right we hand over plans for our personal kingdom and accept the plans for God’s kingdom. Surrender. It is what Jesus was getting at all those times when he said if you want to save your life you have to lose it. He did not mean throw it away. It did not mean just hand it over to chance. He meant if you want to save your life and have the life God hopes and plans for you, you will need to give your life to God’s care and to God guidance. You will have to let go of your hold on your own life. You will have to let go of your determination to have life your way and let God have your life. Surrender.

One of the most enjoyable books I have read recently is *The Boys in the Boat* by Daniel James Brown. It is the story of the eight-man crew from the University of Washington that won the gold medal during the 1936 Olympics. What Brown makes clear is that for eight men to win at that level of competition, they have to surrender. Each of them has to surrender to the boat, to the crew, and to the coach.

Sometimes surrendering can be easy. When we find ourselves in a crisis and have run out of faith in ourselves or in other powers to save us, we may well turn to God for help. But in the absence of a crisis, surrendering as Peter did is hard.

I think we can make a decision, a deep decision, to be a person of faith and we can hold on to that decision for years. But acting like a person of faith, letting God lead us in some of the most important decisions or seasons of our life is hard. It is as though we have faith in Jesus to be our back up, especially if things go wrong, but we are not about to let Jesus lead us in our choices.

One of the reasons why faith does not seem to make a difference in our lives is because we never make this surrender to Christ. We may respect Jesus. We may admire Jesus. We may hold Jesus as a model for how to live. But we have never surrendered to Jesus. We have never put our lives in the hands and in the power of Jesus. We have never given Christ the chance to show what Christ can do with us and to us and for us when we surrender. That is what Peter does here. He puts his tired, fatigued and quite possibly angered self into the hands and the power of Jesus.

III

Now look what happens to Peter because he surrenders.

First there is this miraculous catch of fish. There were so many fish the nets were beginning to break. Peter calls for his partners, James and John go come out with their boat. They filled both boats with fish, with so many fish both boats were in danger of sinking.

It is a miracle. We are to read it as a miracle. Jesus did not have one of those fish finder gadgets. Jesus is showing Peter, James and John and the crowd that he had this extraordinary power over creation. He had the power of the Creator in his life. He had the power of God in his life. He had God in his life because he was God's Son. This is early in Luke's account of the ministry of Jesus. Jesus has already healed people. That was one demonstration or revelation of his extraordinary, sacred and holy powers. Now there is this.

There will always be resistance to miracles. Some people find it hard to accept them and to believe in them.

Such resistance and doubt, even disbelief needs to be handled with respect. Churches need to be places where there is honest conversation about how God works and what Jesus can do. But churches also need to be places that point to the life and power of God in Christ. Churches need to be communities of faith that honor God's freedom to work miracles on our behalf even if we do not understand them.

Years ago I heard someone say, "With God all things are possible but not all things are probable." How nice. How reassuring to believe that God would never do anything improbable. Isn't it much better to have a God who will do things that are improbable? How much better to have a God that does astonishing things and amazing things. How much better to have a God who breaks open our vision and cracks open our world. How much better to have a God who leads us into wonder and amazement and at times drives us to our knees in awe and humility.

God makes it easier to accept God's miracles because the miracles are invariably for our benefit. Here the miracle is a great catch of fish. This is the best catch of Peter's, James's and John's life. It is not just a miracle. It is a blessing.

What God might do in your life because of your surrender might not be as dramatic. But who knows what God could do when God goes fishing around in your life. Who knows what God's power might do with you and for you.

Because Peter surrendered Jesus shows him a miracle and a miracle that is a blessing for his life, a great catch of fish.

Our surrender is God's opportunity.

Then Jesus does more. Peter responds to all this with what might be a surprising reaction. Instead of rejoicing in the best catch of his life, he falls at the feet of Jesus and cries out, "Get away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Jesus did not use the word "sinner". Peter does. Peter brings it up.

If life had been all about acquisition for Peter, if life had been all about what he could have, what he could get, what he could grab, what he could hang on to, what he could pile up so he would be higher than others, Peter would have grabbed all those fish and gone skipping off to home and market. Likewise if Peter had only seen in Jesus the provider of what he wanted to acquire, he might very well and gone up to Jesus and asked him, "Say, what you are doing tomorrow night?"

But Peter is different. He helps us be different. Peter is not so self-centered that he uses himself and his plans as the measure of his life. He cannot explain what has happened but he knows deep in his soul he is now in the presence of a life that is grander and better than he is or ever could be. He calls himself a "sinner". Jesus does not use the word. Peter calls himself as sinner to acknowledge that this Jesus is too good for him and too powerful for him. He uses the word "sinner" to say with deep honesty he is not worthy of being in the presence of a life like this.

Now hear what Jesus says to him. All Jesus says is "Do not be afraid." That is the first part of what Jesus says but it is worth hearing it by itself, "Do not be afraid." What that means is that Peter, James and John are safe. This is what Jesus is saying in the words "Do not be afraid." They

are sinners but they are safe. It is as though Jesus said to them, "You belong here. You belong with me." In First John chapter four is the saying "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

This is what Jesus always does. Especially with people who surrender to him, who give their lives to him. He tells them they belong with him. He tells you, you belong with him. He tells me, I belong with him.

Because Peter was willing to surrender he discovers he belongs with Jesus.

Our surrender is God's opportunity.

Jesus does one more thing with Peter because of Peter's surrender. Jesus gives him a role in the work of Jesus. "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." Not only are Peter, James and John miraculously worthy to be in the Lord's presence, they are now being given a role in his work, his sacred work. They have not been trained for this. They have not been schooled for this. As they will soon learn, they will be thrown in with nine other men and it will be learn as you go. Not only that, but it will be a very mixed bag of men. The very next man that Jesus calls to join him is Levi and Levi is a tax collector. Tax collectors were infamous. This was not just because they collected taxes but because they collected Roman taxes, taxes to pay for the occupying forces in Palestine. Not only that but they were known to be corrupt, to take bribes, to skim off for themselves, and to play favorites.

So all of a sudden, on that morning which began in fatigue and frustration, called into the most sacred work possible, serving the Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a

calling that is still extended. It has been extended to you and me. It is often said that too many churches have forgotten their calling, instead of being fishers of men and women they are tending the aquarium.

IV

There is an old hymn with the words, “My Lord, what a morning!” What a morning this was for Peter, James, and John. That morning on the beach cleaning their nets, Peter, James, and John had no idea what was coming.



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