



**First Congregational Church of Ashfield ❖ United Church of Christ
*Creating Community, Welcoming All***

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**Sunday, February 6, 2022 Reflection on Luke 5:1-11: Sometimes Faith Is All We Have
Rev. David Jones**

The last time we read from any of the Gospel accounts (a few weeks ago), Jesus, suddenly a grown man, began his public ministry rescuing a wedding by turning water into wine. That story doesn't appear in Luke. Instead, in the gospel according to Luke, Jesus makes his first public demonstrations of his ministry on a sabbath day, by healing many people into the night including Simon's mother-in-law. (Simon will become Peter). After the work of this sabbath day, Jesus wakes up at the break of dawn to seek out a deserted place, needing some time alone to rest and recharge. But great crowds of people have now found him.

And this has a great impact on Jesus. Up until now, he had been content to bring his message into the synagogues, and to perform individual acts for individual people. But daybreak has brought a revelation: there are too many people hurting in this world to serve God's will on his own. So, instead of going to a deserted place, Jesus asks Simon to take him out onto the lake, where his voice can reverberate and his teachings can reach all those who have gathered to hear him.

As Jesus is speaking, Simon is listening right there in the boat next to him. It seems Simon already has considerable faith. He had seen Jesus heal his mother-in-law, he knew firsthand what Jesus had been up to on the sabbath. And in our reading this morning, he gives Jesus his fishing boat freely, without hesitation; he stops cleaning his nets, something that can wait, and he jumps right back in the boat so that Jesus' teachings might be heard more clearly.

But even within that faith, Simon has a great doubt. Because when Jesus concludes his teachings, he has an instruction, a command for Simon—"to go now into deeper waters and cast your net again"--and Simon objects. So he has a doubt *within* his faith. Simon explains to Jesus that he and the other fishermen had been up fishing, casting their nets all night long. There simply were no fish to catch. And this is not a light thing. Simon and his family and the families of the people gathered, they depend on the day's catch like daily bread.

Partly this is why Simon pays such close attention to this man Jesus. Remember, they've only just met, and here Simon is doing whatever Jesus says—except this, except keep up such a futile effort. He listens so closely to Jesus because Jesus is giving him, like all the others gathered, good news, news of the kingdom, news of food, news of hope, news of a new life, and Simon and the others need all of these things! They are desperate, they've spent all night trying to come up with the food they need to eat that day, that they would feed their family with, or that they would bring to market and sell to service their debts, and they've come up empty handed. They're barely hanging on. They're hanging on to Jesus' teachings; they are surprised to discover just how much he has come to mean to them in such a short time. But they aren't hanging on to themselves. All this faith they've placed in this strange teacher, but in themselves they place only doubt. In the sea and the fish, they place only doubt. In all the other people that have flocked to these shores, only doubt. So, of course, if this teacher they have faith in asks them to return to the sea so his teachings can be heard, they give freely of themselves, they do not hesitate. But if this teacher asks them to have faith in themselves, and in their nets and in the fish and in the sea, in all that God has created, they object.

But, as Simon explains the situation, he must see that this teacher is unimpressed. Jesus' expression must have grown sterner; Simon gives in. He takes the boat into deeper water, and drops his net. And then this passage really springs to life. The nets are overwhelmed, the boats are overwhelmed, the lake churns and splashes—so many fish have come! But Simon does not leap for joy. He collapses, or he throws himself down, and he confesses to Jesus. He can't bear to be so close to Jesus. Simon calls himself a sinful man, for the doubt that he had. He feels unworthy. Even as he confesses that he has had this doubt, he repeats it, still doubting his place in the good news this teacher has shared with him.

Yet, in this story, Simon only caught the fish *because* he had faith. He had doubt, certainly, but it was a doubt *within* faith. Sometimes this kind of claim, that faith causes anything, that faith makes miracles, is slippery. Because many of us have faith but aren't cured of illness, or have faith but don't get that job we need or don't meet our soul mate; many of us have faith but don't come into any money or good fortune. Well, to be clear, Simon did not have faith that there would be fish; that was not the faith that made the difference. Simon only cast the net again because he had faith in his teacher. It is a clear, causal relationship: because I have faith in this teacher who tells me to try again, I will try again. It is because Simon has tried again, that he ends up succeeding. And he came to have this faith in Jesus after listening to him talk about hope and food and a new kind of kingdom; he came to have this faith after seeing and hearing how Jesus spoke to the people, the impact he was having. Simon had faith because the people desperate like him had faith. And they in turn had faith because Jesus had faith in them. Jesus had faith in Simon. Faith in others can overcome the doubts we have of ourselves.

This passage is often closely associated with discipleship, with making a change or taking a turn in our lives to follow someone or something greater than ourselves. And discipleship is all about this dynamic relationship between faith and doubt, doubt and faith. Because no one can go fishing in this world, or walk in the countryside, or endure a New England winter or see a loved one suffer, without having real doubts about what we are all doing here. No one can be harmed or discriminated against or be made to feel left out or all alone, no one can be made to feel unworthy or sinful and not have serious, profound doubts that God is love. No one can study our history and not have profound doubts that the arc of history bends toward justice. And yet, to look at the world in that way, to tally up what is wrong, is to have faith that it could be right. We know we are cold in an underheated home because we were once held close; we know we have been wronged, because someone—a loved one, or a stranger, a teacher or a nurse, a co-worker, *someone*—reminded us that we have dignity and talent and inherent worth.

Doubt within faith, faith within doubt—with faith in another when we have only doubt in ourselves, with faith in ourselves when we have so much doubt in others—with these together we can perform miracles. But miracles like this one in Luke, like the humble miracle of a net filled with fish. Not miracles like money growing on trees, not miracles like winning the lottery, not miracles like history being whitewashed, not miracles like wishful thinking. Miracles are not easy, they are not riches. Miracles are just when something we do for ourselves becomes something we do for others. Miracles are just when the person we have faith in turns around and has faith in us. In Luke this morning, the miracle is familiar, commonplace—it is a successful catch, enough food to live off of and to share. The miracle is simply when the tiring, hard job of fishing for our survival is turned into the vocation of fishing together with the whole community in mind. The miracle is a man in Jesus who teaches the poor and the oppressed that when God's kingdom comes, when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven, they will no longer be poor and oppressed. The miracle is that the things we must do to survive are already enough to bring about this kingdom, if we do it with faith in each other and only in that. All these people drawn to Jesus made him go out into the lake, made him a disciple of the people who would address them as one body. Their doubts in this world and their faith in him made him think of all people as one community, and show us that the ordinary things we do to survive can become the extraordinary things we do to bring about justice. That is the humble miracle of a net filled with fish.

Alleluia and amen.

