

Called to Significance

January 10, 2021

Luke 5:1-11

I had a hard time getting purchase on this lesson. The lesson writer talks quite a bit about the sea and storms and such, and I can't really say much more in that direction that is useful. I decided to give some background, both geography and the context in Jesus's ministry, and then focus on the apostles, and what being an apostle meant. It is as "fishers of men" that Jesus calls these apostles, and us.

In all of the synoptic gospels (*Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke*) Jesus is portrayed as beginning his teaching and healing ministry in Galilee, having returned there after baptism by John and the Temptations in the wilderness. There is no mention of Jesus returning to Judea, the province around Jerusalem, until the trip that would culminate in the Passion. In contrast, John's gospel has Jesus going back and forth a number of times. Confusing matters a bit, *Luke* seems to use the name "Judea" as including both Judea and Galilee, as in verse 4:44, just before our scripture passage for this lesson.

The body of water called the "Sea of Galilee," as in *Matthew* 4:18 and *Mark* 1:16, is also known as the "Sea of Tiberias" (*John* 6:1), and as here in *Luke*, the "Lake of Gennesaret." The city Tiberias toward the southern end of the lake was the capitol of Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great, who ruled Galilee and nearby areas as tetrarch. He founded Tiberias about 20 A.D., likely needing "builders" from nearby areas of Galilee. *Luke* uses the name Lake of Gennesaret, taken from the name Gennesaret for the plain just to the northwest between Capernaum and Magdala, where the land was very fertile. The lake of Gennesaret is a fresh water lake despite being far below sea level, about -700 feet, farther than Wilkes Barre is above sea level, +525 feet. But the Lake of Gennesaret is fresh because it is drained by the Jordan River, which empties into the Dead Sea, about 1400 feet below sea level. Bear Creek is at +1522 feet, not much further from sea level than the Dead Sea, just in the opposite direction. So Galilee and the area around the lake has a lot of hilly topography. The Lake is about eight by thirteen miles in size, about the same area as the Wyoming Valley, Pittston nearly to Nanticoke by Luzerne to a bit past I-81.

So, it's not large as lakes go. But it was abundant with fish. One of the most common fish was later called "Saint Peter's Fish," now called Tilapia, commonly a

farm-grown fish in our day. It was rather unusual for Jews to be associated with the boats and water earlier. (Consider the story of Jonah, for example. The sea is often a metaphor for chaos.) But the Lake of Gennesaret was small and bounded, although it could still have storms. The fish to be found there were a rich resource needed in a hungry world. So when Jews settled Galilee during the Maccabean period, some became fishermen. By the time of Jesus, the Roman overlords and their allies in the ruling class taxed fishing as well as agriculture heavily to extract as much wealth as they could.

Today's scripture is set on the shore of the Lake of Gennesaret, presumably at Capernaum, early in Jesus's ministry. When Jesus borrows Simon's boat to escape the crowds, and to have a place to teach from, Simon Peter is already well known to him. Most likely he is already a disciple. In John's gospel, Jesus met Peter (called Simon in John) as well as his brother Andrew, and also Philip and Nathaniel, where John the Baptist was ministering in Judea at the Jordan River before returning to Galilee. So at the time of this encounter in Luke, Simon Peter and Andrew were disciples of Jesus as well as remaining employed by fishing. Jesus had apparently made his home in Capernaum (*Matthew* 4:13 and *Luke* 4:31), so doing both was possible. Jesus taught there and performed miracles of healing and cast out a demon (*Luke* 4:33-36). That was where Simon (Hebrew name) Peter (Greek for "rock") lived, and Jesus had already performed a healing on Simon Peter's mother-in-law (4:38-39). So, by the time the story comes to *Luke* Chapter 5, Jesus would have been well known in Capernaum, by Simon, and very likely by everybody else.

The miracle of the catch (5:4-7) shows that God's power in Jesus was wider than what Simon Peter had yet seen. Now, it's not impossible that Jesus was able to see the shoal of fish out in deeper water when Simon Peter could not. Simon was by profession a fisherman, and you'd think his awareness concerning fish would have been greater than that of Jesus. He is obviously surprised by the miracle, and that's the best evidence that it is indeed a miracle, rather than just Jesus being particularly clever. The huge number of fish requires help, and that brings the sons of Zebedee, James and John, into the picture. It seems that they were operating in partnership with Simon Peter, and perhaps Peter's brother Andrew as well.

A similar event to this miracle occurs in *John* 21:1-11 as a post-Resurrection story. Certain disciples have returned to Galilee. Peter says, "I'm going to go fishing." The others go too. They catch nothing all night. The next morning, Jesus, unrecognized by the disciples, calls out from the shore, "Cast your net to the

other side of the boat, and you will find some.” They do, and catch 153 fish, so many they could not be easily hauled in. Might either Luke or John have gotten this story in the wrong place? Might these be two similar but different miracles? We don’t know with assurance, just as with many other seeming differences between the gospels. But, either way, the miracle is there, and comes to us separately from two independent sources, the synoptic gospels going back to *Mark*, and from *John*.

One other interesting fish story occurs in *Matthew* 17:24-27, where Jesus directs Peter to catch a fish. He will find in the fish’s mouth, a coin with which to pay the Temple Tax. Cindy calls this the “Temple Tax Fish” – a different species?

Notice in verse 8 Luke refers to Simon, for the first time, as Simon Peter. This is the only place in Luke where the double name is used. Notice that Simon refers to Jesus as “Lord” here, a recognition of Jesus’s extraordinary nature, long before his confession at Caesarea Philippi. When he says, “Get away from me, Lord,” his expression is one of confession of unworthiness to be in Jesus’s company, not an order for Jesus to depart.

In Luke’s telling of this story, perhaps the most memorable words are Jesus’s words to Simon Peter, “Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men.” (10b, RSV). The KJV is almost identical to the RSV. The NRSV insists on substituting “people” for “men.” “I will make you fishers of men,” (*Matthew* 4:19, KJV/RSV) is how I remember Jesus’s words. Cindy remembers a song from that. We understand what Jesus means. Simon Peter’s, and James’s and John’s calling is to a more committed discipleship. That won’t allow them to earn a living as fishermen as their top priority. Jesus has more to say about the cost of discipleship later, for example, in Luke 14:25-33 and 18:18-30, with parallels in other gospels.

So, how would they sustain their families? Simon Peter was apparently married; he has a mother-in-law in town, presumably living with him and his wife. We don’t know how his family managed. In the case of James and John, their father was already using hired workers; perhaps he would hire more (see *Mark* 1:20). For that matter, how would Jesus and his followers be sustained? There is no detailed discussion of the accounting in the gospels. It would seem they were supported by others, including some number of women who traveled with Jesus and his disciples. Jesus trusted God to provide, and so did these disciples. Beyond that, we can’t say.

In John's story of Judas and the anointing of Jesus's feet (John 12:1-8), we see that Judas was concerned with financial matters, particularly the waste of resources which he said could have been put to better use. Perhaps Judas, as the disciples' treasurer, was less able to remove worry about money from his life. That may have been an issue in his fall. Love of money is said to be a source of evil, but want of money may lead to sin as well. In Judas's case, it led him to want to control, or at least influence, how others used their resources. In our day, we sometimes see lobbying oriented charitable organizations argue that they can do more good by influencing government expenditures, using "other people's money," than by themselves being a direct conduit for doing good works. I find that a concern.

Jesus called twelve men to be his followers, "apostles," as they came to be known. The term "disciples" is more general, including others who chose to follow Jesus. See *Luke* 6:13. There is also the one, Matthias, who was chosen by lot to take Judas's place as an apostle (*Acts* 1:26). In addition, Barnabus, James, the Lord's brother, and Paul are referred to in the Bible as apostles. We know very little about most of these individuals. Indeed, the names of the apostles when listed is not completely consistent. We have to assume that Levi (of *Mark* 2:14) is the same person as Matthew (of *Mark* 18), and Simeon the Cananean and Simeon the Zealot are the same. We also assume Thaddeus and Judas son of James are the same person. John does not list the apostles. But he does name several, including Nathaniel of Cana, who does not appear in the synoptic gospel lists. John also mentions a Judas (not Iscariot) who must be the same as Thaddeus and Judas son of James. Interestingly, John mentions the "Sons of Zebedee," but does not name them. John mentions "the disciple who Jesus loved," without giving a name, in several places, usually taken to be John. There is an unnamed disciple known to the High Priest, perhaps the same, who witnessed Jesus's trial before the Sanhedrin.

We know that of these, Peter was very active in carrying out the commission Jesus gave his apostles and disciples, as testified in Acts. Paul, likewise. We also hear about Barnabas, and we have letters ascribed to John, who tradition says went to Ephesus. Thomas is understood to have reached India and started a Church there. Some, including James the Son of Zebedee, and perhaps John, as well as James the Lord's brother, were martyred. Matthew and John wrote (or were the sources for) the very valuable gospels attributed to them. But, about the rest, we know almost nothing of their subsequent works. That is somewhat just a matter of what Luke knew about when he wrote *The Acts of the Apostles*, the only canonical source for the early history of the Church, other than the epistles that were

preserved. The lack of mention in *Acts* does not demonstrate an absence of works. But, this is often how things happen. I am reminded of the parable of the sower. The seeds are spread. The yield of the particular seeds vary greatly, depending on their chance circumstances. But the overall yield is still a success. Successful agriculture depends on this effect. So, seemingly, does God's work.

The word for "apostle" in the Greek of the New Testament is a fairly unusual word, which can describe a naval expedition or a group of colonists. It is used occasionally for a personal emissary. Jews from about the fourth century on used this same word for emissaries of the Jerusalem patriarchate, who were sent out in pairs to visit the Diaspora (Jews living in the Gentile world) to collect taxes to support the rabbinate. They often preached and taught in synagogues as well. The rabbinic term for these men meant "those sent". The Old Testament uses the word in reference to four men, Moses, Elijah, Elisha, and Ezekiel, in the sense of commissions to perform miracles on God's behalf. (Source: *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol.1, 1962, p.171) This is the word Jesus chose for these particular followers. The early Church later limited the definition of an Apostle to "The Twelve," but did so without excluded Paul, Barnabus, and James. Those who came later who claimed apostolic status were considered heretics. Apostolic authority was deemed necessary in the face of various heresies, especially in the second and third centuries. And so, Apostolic authority became a criterion for inclusion of the various books in the canon of scripture for what we have as the "New Testament."

We in our day cannot and should not claim to be apostles. But we do claim, as followers of Jesus, to be disciples. We are the ones who inherit the charge that Jesus gave his disciples, saying:

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Acts 1:8

In our time, we live at the other end of the earth from Jerusalem, and faithful disciples have reached even here with the gospel! Yet, we are called to continue Jesus's mission as his disciples. (I quote Jesus's commission from *Acts* rather than *Matthew* because our reading was from *Luke*.)

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, open our eyes to see you on the lake, calling Peter, James, and John. Amen.*