

5th Sunday after Epiphany
Luke 5:1-11
February 6&7, 2010
Intern Pastor Ken Staib

Now that was an interesting story, wasn't it? You know, the story we just heard, of Jesus coming along and getting into Simon's boat, later telling him to put the nets into the water, despite a night of not catching anything at all. A story about nets and boats full of fish. A story of Simon who feels unworthy in Jesus' presence, and Jesus telling Simon he will be catching people. A story that ends with three men who leave their work behind to follow Jesus. It's an interesting story, a very interesting story. It's a story that could be about *any one of us*, including me.

It's a story that, for me, begins seven years ago, in the lobby of my home church, St. John's Lutheran in Stony Ridge, Ohio. I was chatting with our interim pastor, Pastor Karl, who was serving our church in the aftermath of a bitter conflict. Out of nowhere, he asked me if I had ever thought about becoming a pastor. I thought a moment, and replied that I hadn't. He explained that he was thinking of ways to bring our congregation back together, and he thought that supporting a student in seminary might be one way to do this. And he happened to think of me. I told him that I had never thought about it, and really had no desire to do it.

As it ended up, we didn't send anyone to seminary, and I actually kind of forgot about that conversation. That is, until two years later. One Sunday morning after worship a dear woman in our congregation, Janet, approached me after worship. "Ken, have you read Pastor's column in this month's newsletter?" she asked. "No we haven't gotten ours yet," I replied. "Well I just want you to know that I thought of you when I read it." Before I could say anything more she walked away, leaving me puzzled. Two days later our newsletter came. My curiosity abounding, I sat down to read our Pastor's column. In it he wrote about the urgent need for pastors throughout the ELCA. He wondered if there were people in the congregation,

particularly younger people, who might have the gifts needed to become a pastor. My hands trembled as I read it. Janet thinks I would make a good pastor? Actually, it became quite clear that she thought so, because about three months later while standing in the hallway after Sunday School she walked up to me and said, “Ken I thought you would be in seminary by now.” Whoa, slow down here.

While all this was going on, I was also going through a challenging time spiritually. I was experiencing a sense of dryness, as if God was distant and not at work in my life. At first I just thought I was burnt out. I had been under a lot of pressure lately, both at work and at church as leader of our praise band. I figured if I could just reduce my stress level I would be fine. I tried some different things, but nothing seemed to help. I soon became frustrated and discouraged and went to see my pastor, Pastor Daniel. We met one evening in our chapel and talked about what I was going through, trying to understand why I was feeling this way, and figuring how I might get through it. Then at one point in the conversation Pastor Daniel said, “Ken, maybe God is calling you to become a pastor.” I sat for a moment, stunned, then said, “Well, I wanted to talk to you about that, too,” and I told him about what Janet had been saying to me. Then he told me that *he* thought I had gifts for pastoral ministry, and that he had felt that way a few months after he arrived at St. John’s as our pastor. He encouraged me to think about it, and then he asked me how I felt. “Scared to death,” I replied.

Sometimes God comes along and enters our ordinary lives in unexpected ways at unexpected times, and when that happens our natural response is to resist. Jesus came along and got into Simon’s boat, just as he and his fishing buddies were washing their nets after a long night of not catching any fish. And then he tells Simon “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Those were probably the same nets that they had been washing.

But Simon protests, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.” Who can blame him? I’m sure he was exhausted.

I left the church that evening with mixed emotions. I felt a sense of wonder, but I also felt a strong sense of reluctance. Oh, I had all kinds of excuses: *Not right now God*, I have a good job. *Not right now God*, they really need me at the church to lead the praise band. *Not right now God*, I don’t like getting up in front of people to talk. *Not right now God*, I can’t teach, I can’t counsel, I can’t possibly do all those things pastors do. I had voiced some of those excuses that evening, to which Pastor Daniel responded, “When you say yes to God, all the excuses go away.”

So the deliberations began. It took me almost two weeks before I even said anything to my parents, and then my brothers. I talked with close friends. I talked some more with my pastor. I read books on call and vocation. I went to visit Trinity Lutheran Seminary for a weekend, not really knowing what to expect. I had a wonderful visit that weekend, and for the first time I could *almost* see myself becoming a pastor. Suddenly the call was becoming a little louder. “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

Six months later, I began to feel like I needed to take some first steps. I simply had to find out if the call was real. I knew what needed to be done to start the candidacy process, which is the process the church has in place for those pursuing public ministry. I downloaded the forms and began my entrance essay. On a sunny morning in September, with mixed emotions, I placed an envelope in the mailbox containing my entrance paperwork. I was now going out into the deep water. Two months later I had an interview with John, a member of the candidacy committee, an interview that went well. At the end of the interview I asked John if he could see gifts in me for ministry. He said he did. One of my pastor’s favorite phrases was starting to

come true. He told me many times that, “If this is God’s call, the doors *will* open.” The doors were starting to open.

By this point it had been nearly a year since that life-changing conversation with Pastor Daniel. I began to realize it was time for others to know what was going on. Though I was still reluctant, I was also becoming increasingly excited. I had to tell other people. However, in some cases, the prospect of telling other people was kind of scary, like when I told my boss.

I had been working as an estimator for about seven years and was getting pretty good at it. The work was interesting, and I had some great coworkers. My boss, Jeff, had known me before I started my estimating career, which in a way made it even harder to tell him. Jeff was a busy guy, and it was hard to catch him in his office, so one day I left a voice mail telling him I needed to talk to him. Later in the day he stopped in my office. As he closed the door and sat down I got incredibly nervous. I had been rehearsing this conversation for weeks. I stammered around and told him that I was feeling called to the ministry, and that I had begun the process of pursuing that call, and that it meant I would probably be leaving the company. His reaction was immediate, and positive.

The following week I told our church council, just a few days before our annual congregational meeting. They managed to keep it quiet so that it would be a surprise for the congregation. After I told the congregation, the response was overwhelmingly supportive. I told the people in my department at work, and soon the whole office knew. The following months sped by as I applied to seminary and continued to work through the steps of the candidacy process. Later that spring the candidacy committee gave me a positive entrance decision, the last step required to start seminary. Doors were opening every step of the way. I was out in the deep water now, and I was letting down the nets.

But it was not all easy. One of the hardest times of my life was the month before I started seminary. It was a time of saying goodbye, to coworkers, to people at church, to neighbors, to family members, and to a way of life. I left a life that at the time was pretty easy, and relatively predictable. When I started classes at Trinity over two years ago, I was starting a life that was *not* easy, *not* predictable, and actually pretty scary at times. I still had days when I resisted the call. There were many days during my first semester of seminary when I felt lost. Days when I left class feeling like my head had exploded. Nights when I had to reread pages two or three times to understand. There were times when I almost pulled the nets out of the water. But I hung in there. I kept the nets down.

And the nets began to fill up. I passed classes. I came back for a second year. The candidacy committee endorsed my progress, clearing the way for internship. And now here I am in Muskegon, Michigan, on an internship that has been a time of growth and learning. And more and more I am realizing that yes this is my call.

The story about Simon is an interesting story, but it's our story too. God calls ordinary people doing ordinary things to do extraordinary things for him. God calls each of us to put our boats out into the deep water and let down our nets for a catch. Just what exactly that entails is different for each of us. Like Simon, you may have resisted that call, or maybe you are resisting that call right now. But Simon's reluctance turns to obedience, and God makes a way. Sometimes the call of God becomes so irresistible that we cannot help but follow, and when we do, amazing things can happen. Suddenly what seemed impossible, becomes possible, not because of anything we do, but because of what God does.

That doesn't mean that when we follow Jesus everything becomes easy. Fishing is hard work, and so is following God's call. Taking the boat out into the deep water is scary. And sometimes it doesn't make any sense to let the nets back down when you haven't caught

anything all night. Life is easier when we play it safe, stay at the shore, and stick with what we know. It is scary to leave behind what is familiar, to do something new. But hear the words of Jesus spoken to Simon, “Do not be afraid.” So go ahead, go out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.

Amen