

March 15, 2020

“Walking With Peter: Catch People”

Luke 5:1-11, Psalm 34:1-11, Psalm 36:1-2

**[Read Psalm 34:1-11]**

During the Lenten season, the Church focuses on following Jesus toward the Cross and beyond. This year we are more specifically following Jesus to the cross by staying close to a person who is Walking With Jesus toward the Cross, but doesn't yet know that's where they are headed. His name is Simon, but Jesus gives him a new name: Peter; which means “Rock.” As Peter walks with Jesus, we are Walking with Peter; through multiple ups and downs, amidst moments of clarity and confusion, in victory and defeat. Most of the time it doesn't seem like Peter's very rock solid; sometimes his life is more like sinking sand.

Last week we were in this same passage; but today we'll be focusing on the second half of the action between Peter and Jesus. Before I read Luke 5:1-11, I want to mention the three important things we saw last week.

First, we saw there is a grace-filled Learning Curve when we follow Jesus. When we put together the stories from all four gospels (especially Luke 4-5 and John 1), we realize that Peter has several exposures to Jesus before the final scene of our passage today. He had time to digest who Jesus was and what He could do. Peter watched Jesus heal people, listened to Him teach, and witnessed a fishing miracle before he decided to follow. Peter reminds us that the step of faith to follow Jesus is not usually instantaneous; that there's always Grace and Space with God. Matthew and Mark's identical and very brief versions of this story don't convey this so it's helpful we also have Luke and John.

The second reality is that we must, at some point and in one way or another, deal with the Authority of Jesus Word. God does give us Grace and Space to check His Son Jesus out; to observe His compassionate power as He heals and His immense wisdom as He teaches. But there's still that moment when we find out who's really in charge. Will we keep trying to run our own lives or surrender to Him – even when what He asks of us doesn't make sense?

Finally, we emphasized that Jesus' primary command (in one form or another) is an inspiring and hope-filled Call (command) to Try Again. “Go ahead, try again. I know you're tired and you gave it a shot but try again.” This call to try again can apply to our families, our faith, things we've attempted and failed, friendships that have gotten off track, habits that we can't seem to break, job changes, and just about anything else. I hope you can hear Jesus as He says, “Try again.”

So last week we saw that there's a Learning Curve when we follow Jesus. Jesus and His Word have authority that demands a response one way or another. And Jesus often calls us to simply trust Him and try again. **[Now let's take a look at Luke 5:1-11.]**

We all love a good fishing story. Last week I told you a story about my friend Greg and his amazing couple of catches back in the Sierra Nevada Mountains on the San Joaquin River – at a place that was very important to my family and some of his closest friends. **[The story was captured in my Children’s Sermon last week, March 8, if you want to check it out. It’s true!]**

My other great fishing story didn’t take place on the San Joaquin River but out in the Pacific Ocean – near where I grew up. My dad and his best friend – the same one who always went with my dad to the Sierra Nevada’s – took their two boys deep sea fishing in Channel Islands. I’d never been and this wasn’t really what my dad and Al enjoyed either, but what the heck, I think they each had a ‘two-for-one’ coupon.

So this was DEEP sea fishing. It takes no skill. We weren’t surface fishing for barracuda or sea bass. All you do is drop your line in the water several hundred feet and wait. You can’t feel anything or tell if the fish took your bait. You just wait. I started at the back of the boat but as we all reeled up our lines, the crew’s main job was to help everyone disentangle; taking you up and over (or down and under) the people next to them. By the time most people’s lines were up I was at the front the boat and reeling like crazy. They were actually all waiting for me.

I remember looking directly at the spot where my line entered the water and noticing a pinkish glow getting closer to the surface. I thought to myself as a 12 year-old, ‘wouldn’t it be cool if I caught a fish?’ And, sure enough, it was a fish. [I need to pause and mention that everyone kicked in \$1 as we headed out to sea to ‘The Pot.’ The biggest fish was awarded the prize at the end of the day.] I didn’t know if my fish was very big or not, but when I heard one of the old guys say, “There goes the pot,” I knew this was a big one. I caught a 36 inch, 18 pound Rock Cod with bulging eyes and tongue! Isn’t that an awesome fishing story?

Luke chapter 5 is a great fishing story. No fish during the prime nighttime hours when most people are sleeping, but a net-busting catch in the middle of the day with a bunch of fans cheering them on. This is a perfect moment for a fisherman. So what’s with Peter? He’s not looking at the crowd saying, “Check this out! There are enough fish to support us for months.” Nor is he recruiting Jesus to become a silent partner in their fishing business. Are you puzzled by his response? “When Simon Peter saw [all the fish] 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.” (Luke 5:8-9)

How do you put together amazement and falling down at someone’s feet then asking them to leave? What is Peter doing? More importantly, what is Peter feeling?

It’s called “fear of the Lord.” These days, fear is a very negative word. We fear people who are different than we are. We fear for our safety. With COVID-19 we are fearing for our health and some are, rightfully, fearing for their lives. We have to be careful how we use the word “fear.”

Even if we understand what we mean by “fear of the Lord,” how we communicate with others who have no idea what it means is very important. The term “fear of the Lord” is quite plentiful in the Old Testament, which makes some want to write it off. Psalm 34 uses it three times: “The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him and delivers them.” (Psalm 34:7) “O fear the Lord, you His holy ones.” (Psalm 34:9a) “Come, children, and I will teach you to fear the Lord.” (Psalm 34:11)

But right in the middle of all this talk about “fearing the Lord” there is language about having radiant faces that will never be ashamed (34:5), tasting and seeing that the Lord is good (34:8), having no want (34:9b), lacking no good thing (34:10), and having many days to enjoy good (34:12). So clearly, “fear of the Lord” isn’t all gloom and doom.

Psalm 36:1-2 helps us a bit more. “I have a message from God in my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: There is no fear of God before their eyes. In their own eyes they flatter themselves too much to detect or hate their sin.”

In scripture, “Fear of the Lord” – which sounds kind of bad – is actually something that leads to joy and life and blessing. Not having “fear of the Lord” leads to self-flattery, which leads to self-deception, which leads to self-destruction. So how might we better define “fear of the Lord?” Some would say that awe or deep reverence is a better way to say it today. Peter uses the term “fearful reverence” (1 Peter 1:17) in his first letter years later. I like what Tim Keller says about fearing God: “[Fearing God] is to be so filled with joyful awe before the magnificence of God that we tremble at the privilege of knowing, serving, and pleasing Him.” (in *The Songs of Jesus*, reading for March 11)

“Fear of the Lord” means we are ‘right-sizing God and ourselves.’ When we recognize how great God is we inevitably see how puny we are. It’s as if Peter is saying, ‘Lord, I’ve seen you heal people and cast out demons and preach with authority, and now THIS; You’re commanding fish and providing an abundance for my family. This is too much . . . YOU are too much . . . and I am too little.’ “Go away from me.”

“Fear of the Lord” helps us enter into a reality that allows us to see how big God is, and how much we need Him. But it’s a tricky balance that we don’t often get quite right. Peter’s “fear of the Lord” may be a little heavy on the fearfulness or shame of who he is – or isn’t. Like us, he’s probably putting the exclamation point (or microscope) on his side of the relationship formula, instead of focusing a telescope on the greatness and glory of Jesus. Peter thinks Jesus’ greatness and his own sinfulness means he can’t have anything to do with Jesus; OR – more likely – that Jesus wouldn’t want anything to do with him. And that’s where he gets it wrong . . . and where we often go wrong as well. It turns out that this wonderful “fear of the Lord” isn’t supposed to paralyze or separate and distance us from Jesus; but that’s what it tends to do if we’re not careful.

My own story of coming to Christ at the age of 9 ½ at church camp is an example of how difficult it is to navigate this balance. I remember hearing the gospel for the first time that I can remember on a Tuesday night. Up until that time – even though I had grown up hearing the stories in Sunday School – I thought that those with fewer sins (“red x’s in God’s Big Book” is what I pictured) got to go to heaven. Because I had a lot of not-so-great-teenagers in my neighborhood, I was pretty sure God would overlook my sins – which were pretty bad (I’m serious) for a 7, 8 and 9 year-old, because their sins were so much worse.

So I prayed to receive Christ that night and committed my life to Jesus. I remember waking up the next morning with a sense of relief AND a pit in my stomach. I was playing with God up until that point; minimizing my sin and His holiness. I actually didn’t have an appetite for breakfast. I think some of what I was feeling was actually “fear of the Lord.” Unfortunately, this perspective would later lead to ‘distancing’ myself from God (or thinking He was ‘distancing’ Himself from me) when I failed in the future. We have to be careful with the balance of staying close to Christ (being “Rooted in Jesus”) and having a proper perspective on God’s holiness.

Jesus is being careful with Peter because He wants to banish the kind of fear that focuses too much on our puniness and unworthiness, while ignoring His power and grace.

So what does Jesus say to Peter? And to us?

“Do not be afraid.” Of course, He says that! Jesus doesn’t want Peter to cower and depart from Him, because the point isn’t to depart from Jesus but to join Him in His mission to catch people. God works best with us when we recognize how great He is and how humble we ought to be before Him – WHILE WE REMAIN CLOSE TO HIM. That’s just the kind of person God is looking for. Humble and reverent; self-aware but not self-loathing; in awe and, knowingly, in need.

“Do not be afraid, Peter. You think this catch of fish was impressive? Wait until you see what I have waiting for you and Me. Don’t depart from Me I don’t want to depart from you. Let’s go catch some people!”

Do you hear that gracious invitation? Jesus knows how great and magnificent He is. And He knows how woefully short we fall of His glory. He knows how fearful we can be in the presence of such glory, and how that fear tends to drive us away from Him instead of TO Him. So He says – again and again – “Do not be afraid.” And once that unhealthy fear is gone . . . watch out!

“When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed Jesus.” (Luke 5:11) And those men – as they followed Jesus and stayed close to Him – changed the world. Let’s follow Jesus right along with Peter; humbly, reverently, in awe of who He is and what He can do . . . all the while remembering that He calls us to join Him without fear or condemnation.

