



God at Work

Luke 5:1-11

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Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake. The fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore.

Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

Simon answered, "Master, we've worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I'll let down the nets."

When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.

But when Simon Peter saw it, 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. And so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.

Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you’ll be catching people.”

When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Luke 5:1-11

When Jesus told his disciples that from then on they would be catching people, he did not envision how peculiar preachers would sound when they try to explain how loving our neighbors is like fishing with a rod and reel. Part of the problem is that fishing is not an enjoyable experience for the fish. Fishing is a practical joke from which the fish never recovers. If you have read *Moby Dick* you know that being hooked and reeled in is not fun for the fish. If you have seen *Finding Nemo* you know it is upsetting to the fish’s father. Jesus could have chosen a more pleasant analogy.

So maybe we should not think of this as a fish story. Maybe this is about what happens when God shows up at work. This story takes place at a turning point in Jesus’ ministry. In chapter four Jesus preaches in his home synagogue and the congregation tries to throw him off a cliff. Jesus decides not to preach a second sermon to that particular congregation. Now he is preaching on the beach. He preaches in other synagogues after this

story, but the time comes when none of the religious institutions will let him speak.

The crowds follow Jesus everywhere. He discusses whatever is on people's minds—laughs, smiles, encourages the best comments, listens carefully, and sees through the questions meant to show the questioner's intelligence. On this occasion the crowd is so big that the people in the front row are getting wet, like it is a Gallagher concert.

As Jesus talks, two boats come in empty after a frustrating night—more sea weed than sea feed. The fishermen begin washing the leaves, algae, and tiny Dorys out of their nets. Jesus thinks it will be easier to teach while sitting in one of the boats, so he asks Simon to push out a little from the bank and anchor there.

Simon keeps working. Every now and then he tries to look like he is listening, but he is tired and wants his boat back. When Jesus finishes speaking, he decides to thank his corporate sponsor: “Take your boat out into the deep water and let down your nets again.”

Simon is dumb-founded. Jesus, a carpenter, is telling Simon Peter, a big-time fisherman, where the fish are biting. When Simon fishes, other fishermen line up to watch.

Peter is a scientist. He tastes the water, scans the sky, and peers into the lake. He knows how the fish run. He knows how stupid it is to try in broad daylight what has failed all night. Jesus is a carpenter. He should stick to hammering nails.

Simon answers, “We’ve worked hard all night without catching anything,” but Jesus is already rowing. All night long, Peter had rowed from place to place. All night long, he had let down the nets. All night long, he had caught nothing. Now this carpenter is insisting they try again.

You know the tone that teenagers use when responding to what they consider a dumb request by their parents. Peter rolls his eyes and thinks: “We’ve fished all night long, without a minnow, guppy, or goldfish to show for it, but by all means, if you, master and commander of the sea, Mighty Poseidon, Captain Ahab, Popeye the Sailor Man say so, we’ll try again.”

Simon Peter knows this is not going to work, but because Jesus asked, the nets go over the side. Something strange happens. Something is wrong. The muscles of their arms tighten under the weight of the fish. The nets are not budging.

This is the mother of fish stories. It is as if all the fish in the sea come to the surface at once. Fish leap into the boat in a mass suicide. This is such a catch that they yell for their partners in the other

boat. They catch such a slew of fish that they swamp both boats. They are sinking under the weight of the fish.

Maybe Jesus created this huge catch of fish or maybe it is just that Jesus pays more attention and sees this phenomenal school. Either way, Peter suddenly realizes that Jesus is different. Peter was there when Jesus preached sermons, attracted huge crowds, and healed Peter's own mother-in-law, but this—knowing where the fish are—is what gets to Peter.

He falls to his knees, “Go away. I can't handle this.”

Peter trusts himself and nobody else, and now he has met someone whose instincts are better than his. Jesus knows more than Peter knows about what Peter does every day. Peter asks Jesus to leave, but Jesus has no intention of going, “Don't be afraid.”

God will make Peter more of the person Peter should be. Jesus invites these fishermen to become disciples. They give up everything to follow. They leave their boats and start living like Jesus.

Most people who come to church on Sunday recognize that Jesus is an expert in his field. Jesus' parables are wonderful. The Sermon on the Mount is fascinating. Jesus is a top-notch debater.

But Jesus does not appear to be an expert on twenty-first century life in New York. It is hard to

picture Jesus at our office, our home, or our school. We understand our situation. We do not look for advice on how to do what we do from a non-English speaking Jewish rabbi who lived on the other side of the world two thousand years ago.

Some days we do not think much about God. We keep what we do and what God might want us to do at a comfortable distance from one another. Connections between our faith and our work are few and far-between.

Maybe we do not think much about God, because we suspect that we could do better. Giving our days to God might make our lives more complicated, but giving our days to God would make our lives better. When we understand that we live in God's presence, our days matter more. We are less likely to ask, "How do I get through my list of things to do?" and more likely to ask, "How can I do what I do with more love?" Our lives could be better.

Simon, James, and John are in the middle of an ordinary work day. This story is about how every day is an opportunity to recognize that God is at work. Every day we do the work of creation and maintenance, innovation and upkeep. In the frustration of never-ending paperwork and in the fulfillment of new projects, our faith can impact our

work, even if we are in a profession that does not attract many saints.

We do not usually notice the way God is at work in the daily details. What do the meetings, emails and deadlines have to do with God? But God is with us when we act with kindness, when we share credit and did not have to, when we are grateful for the paycheck that helps us care for those we love, and when our work matters.

God inspires deeper thoughts. God speaks in our conversations. God is at work when we feel energized about what we do. Our work will not always be exciting, but God helps us see it with more understanding.

There are moments when something holy happens or maybe it was just a coincidence or maybe it was both. Someone has a problem and we solve it, because God has given us the gifts to solve problems. We are in a meeting that is going long and going poorly and we tell God what we are feeling. We are praying for better results. We are talking to a co-worker who is going through a hard time. She thanks us for our concern. God helps us care for her.

Seeing where we experience joy is seeing where God is at work. We make a difficult decision and know we made the right decision. We say something thoughtful to someone who is not

thoughtful. Someone says a gracious word about what we are doing and it feels like a gift.

The things we do, the people we meet, and the work we create are chances to share our life with God. A lawyer pushes for justice. A teacher sees the light go on. A manager helps workers get along. A CPA makes the numbers less intimidating. An architect creates something beautiful. When we pay attention to God at work we see what our lives could be.

We are going to visit my parents, so I send an email to Danny McBrayer, my eighth grade history teacher, who I have not seen in 43 years. Mr. McBrayer throws the barista by ordering “a cup of coffee,” which is not on the menu at the Caffeinated Indian—which is a really bad name for a coffee shop—but it is the only coffee shop in Fulton, Mississippi.

When I was in the eighth grade, Mississippi was ranked 50th in education and was some distance from being 49th. My school, about 30 miles west of Fulton, reflected our state’s poverty, racism, and provincialism. Good teachers like Danny McBrayer fought uphill battles.

During study hall one day a group of us were discussing the quickest way to make our first million. Mr. McBrayer interrupted to tell

us about driving a school bus, watching the sunrise each morning and seeing the sunrise change through the year. He said, “I drive the bus to get paid, but without the sunrise it wouldn’t be worth it. Your job needs to be worth it.”

In a school that had only recently integrated and was painfully divided, Mr. McBrayer went out of his way to spend time with African-American students like Ronnie Agnew, who is now the executive director of Mississippi Public Broadcasting.

Checking in after 43 years leaves a lot to talk about. Mr. McBrayer knows everyone’s story. My biology teacher continues to believe that she could have married Elvis Presley. Coach Wright was inducted into the Mississippi Football Hall of Fame. Our principal, who smoked a pipe, died of throat cancer.

When I asked about my least favorite teacher, Mr. McBrayer said, “She just never liked poor kids—and that’s all we had.”

One of the best athletes in school history is in prison. Two of the three sisters whose names rhymed—Glynn, Lynn, and Flynn—died years ago—one with cancer and one in a car accident. Bobby got into lots of trouble, became a preacher, and then died. Willie’s had a hard

time. Mr. McBrayer said: “His family fell apart and he has no legal income.”

Jimmy and Dorothy surprised everyone by not getting married. Dorothy ended up with a pro golfer’s cousin. Jimmy went through a divorce, but his ex-father-in-law liked him so much they went into business together. (I am changing some of these names because I cannot read my writing and I am afraid I may announce a divorce where there is only peace and harmony.)

Lori, on whom most of the eighth grade had a crush, married the quarterback and is doing just fine. Joe, the shooting guard on the basketball team, is selling tires. Goony—not his real name—runs his dad’s garage. Peachy—also not found on his birth certificate—is selling satellite dishes—which I did not know they still sold. Craig is an engineer with NASA. Todd, who was a great best friend, teaches teachers in Nashville.

Mr. McBrayer knows all these stories because he is part of all of these stories. He made everyone’s story better—at least a little better.

Being a good teacher in a hard place for that long is difficult work. The playing field is not level. Many are born with two strikes

against them. Aunt Becky is not bribing anyone to get them into a good college.

Saints, like my teacher, give themselves to doing their best work in the most authentic ways. They care for people. They pay attention. They listen. They live with the love of God.

Good eighth grade history teachers make the world a better place. God's saints are the students, nurses, doctors, lawyers, writers, editors, accountants, architects, financiers, fundraisers, realtors, retirees, landscapers, librarians, musicians, scientists, and stay-at-home parents, who understand that God is at work every day.

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