

## Netting a Dream Luke 5:1-11

“To be a winner, think like a winner. Practice positive thinking — with reality checks.” Can you identify the author of that encouraging advice? Was it Dale Carnegie? Norman Vincent Peale? Robert Schuller?

Wrong. It was none of those pundits of positivity. It was Donald Trump, in a January 16, 2014, tweet. Even Mr. Trump’s opponents must concede that he benefitted from his own advice. Having begun as a political outsider, he consistently thought like a winner and tirelessly promoted himself as such. Although he lost the popular vote on election day, the Electoral College declared him the winner.

We Americans do love a winner — and we’re none too fond of losers. We lionize our winning candidates, our sports heroes, our successful generals, our Oscar-winning actors. And what of those who don’t make it to the pinnacle of the podium at the medal ceremony, even if they lost the race by only hundredths of a second? That microscopic difference is the razor-thin dividing line between fame and obscurity, between adulation and indifference.

Simon's probably thinking about winners and losers, this morning by the lakeshore. He sure feels like a failure. Simon and his companions have just finished an exhausting night of fishing. Again and again they hauled in their heavy nets. Each time, they picked through the netting hopefully, but found not a single fish worth keeping. They've known bad days in the past, but few as bad as this one.

The only positive feature about this day is the scene unfolding a short distance away. Jesus of Nazareth is standing by the lakeshore. Simon has the utmost respect for this man, who has recently healed his mother-in-law. Simon's a bit concerned that the eager crowd, pressing in from three sides, is threatening to back Jesus right into the water.

Just then Jesus looks over to him. Their eyes meet in recognition. Interrupting his teaching, Jesus walks the short distance over to the stretch of sand where Simon's boat is beached.

He climbs in and asks Simon to push off into the lake. "Why not?" thinks the fisherman. "The net-mending can wait." He and his mates push off and then drop anchor just a few feet from shore. The crowd closes in, standing at the water's edge. From the boat, the rabbi resumes his teaching.

When he's finished, Jesus turns to Simon and instructs him: "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." To a seasoned mariner like Simon, this sounds like foolishness. It's far too late in the day for good fishing — and this has proven to be a terrible day for fishing.

But then the reckless "Why not?" rises to the top of Simon's mind. He beckons to James and John, and they sail the two boats toward the middle of the lake. The catch is enormous: too big for one boat and even for the two boats together. In all his years on the lake, Simon has never seen anything like this.

"Who is this man?" he asks himself. "And who am I, to deserve such a mighty sign?" A cascade of memories rolls over him in an instant. Simon remembers who he is. Regret is piled upon regret. He kneels in the bilge water, bowing his head to the teacher's knees. "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

The rabbi's voice is gentle: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." It's not so much an invitation as a statement of fact.

There was a miracle on the lake that day: a miraculous catch of fish. Even more miraculous is Jesus' other catch: three Galilean fishermen, who leave their nets and follow him.

Who would have thought it? Simon Peter, James and John are not the sort of people you'd think would drop everything and set off on a spiritual quest. But they do, not because of anything extraordinary in themselves, but because of the extraordinary Lord who has come into their lives.

This story of Jesus calling his first disciples has several things to teach us about our own spiritual lives. The first is that *Jesus doesn't take volunteers*. That may sound astonishing to anyone who's been around church for a while and has heard those perpetual calls for volunteers. But do you ever read of Jesus saying "We need a few volunteers ..."?

He certainly doesn't make any such appeal in today's passage. Jesus simply climbs into Simon's fishing boat. Luke does tell us he "asks" Simon to take him out into the lake. But the fact that he's already sitting in the boat shows he's got a pretty clear idea of what Simon's answer is going to be.

The same is true with his calling of Simon to be a disciple. Jesus doesn't make a general announcement, "I'm looking for some volunteers to join my team." He doesn't even have a snappy slogan, like the Marine Corps' "We're looking for a few good men." No, Jesus just turns to Simon and says, "From now on you will be catching people." Sometimes we in the church depend a little too much on volunteers. When something needs doing, we ask for a show of hands and then hope someone comes forward.

Very often, those who do are “the usual suspects” — those who typically volunteer for everything. Yet if Christian service is a matter of God’s call, not the goodness of our hearts, then maybe we ought to stop talking about volunteers altogether. Maybe we should talk, instead, about God’s call. Maybe we ought to say, “We have a need for some teachers in the Sunday school” or “some members for the choir” or “someone to help with the soup kitchen — and we’re trusting that God’s calling the right person to do that. Maybe the right person is *you*.”

The church is not a voluntary organization. It may resemble the various service clubs that are out there in the community, but those who follow Jesus Christ as members of the church do not volunteer; they are called. Jesus doesn’t want volunteers; he wants disciples.

And where does he find those disciples? Sometimes from the ranks of those who have failed at something. That’s the second message of this text. Of course, this runs against the logic of most other organizations. The Army, for instance, has recruiting offices all over and staffs them with specially trained warrant officers who are taught what to look for in potential soldiers. Once there was a time when the Army took just about any able-bodied individual, but those days are long gone. All that hightech equipment requires men and women of a certain level of ability to operate it. The Army has standards.

Jesus Christ, on the other hand, is not especially interested in credentials or experience. Look at what he does with Simon: He takes this fisherman, who hasn't been able to bring in a single fish all night, and shows him where to cast his net to bring in a massive catch. Then Jesus tells Simon that henceforth he's going to be catching people!

There's a classic *Peanuts* comic strip that shows Lucy in the outfield, ready to catch a fly ball. She extends her glove to catch it, but at the last moment she pulls back, dropping it. Then Lucy turns to Charlie Brown, the team's manager, and explains, "I almost had it, but then my past got in my eyes."

How often it is that, when faced with a challenge of one kind or another, we simply freeze up, allowing our past to get in our eyes! That's what Peter's doing as he sobs, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

In looking for disciples, Jesus often doesn't seek out the expert, the selfsufficient, the skillful. Rather, he calls those who have failed. That failure (as defined by the world) he transforms into success (by heaven's standards). In the words of the Medieval mystic Julian of Norwich: "If there be anywhere on earth a lover of God who is always kept safe from falling, I know nothing of it — for it was not shown me. But this was shown: that in falling and rising again we are always kept in the same precious love."

The final thing we can learn from this passage has to do with how to begin our journey of faith. Jesus invites us to risk, taking one step at a time.

Whenever we hear that quiet, insistent inner voice suggesting that maybe we are the one to respond to God's call and meet a particular need, the hardest part of the whole process is taking that first step. How easy and even pleasant it is to simply sit and contemplate the wonder of God speaking to us! How attractive it is to call ourselves Christians because of things we believe — while those beliefs of ours bear little relation to how we're actually living our lives! We may resolve, again and again, to take that step and do something for God, but somehow never quite get around to it.

A jazz musician would never perform a single number, were it not for the willingness to risk that first note. When Jesus speaks kindly to Simon there in his fishing boat and tells him, "From now on you will be catching people," Simon could well have procrastinated away any response on his part. But he doesn't do that. There's something about that bond, that connection, he feels with this man he will soon call "Master" that allows him to take that risk.

Perhaps that will prove true for you as well. Remember: Jesus isn't looking for volunteers; he's looking for failures, for those who aren't at all sure they have what he's looking for, but who are willing to trust him enough to take a risk and see if he will indeed supply what they need. Maybe Jesus is calling to you today. And maybe today is the time you will get up and follow!