

Called Out Into the Deep
Luke 5:1-11
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
February 4, 2007
Dr. Brent Beasley

This weekend the Southeast Region of the NEA (National Education Association) is meeting in Memphis. Thursday night and Friday they had a special conference on religion and public schools—to talk about how the faith community and our public schools can work together for our children. I had the privilege of speaking on Friday.

I was a little uneasy about the time slot they gave me. I was to give the final, summary speech at the end of the conference on Friday right after lunch. It was a two-day conference; there was lunch on Friday; and they scheduled me to be the last speaker right after lunch. I was afraid by the time I got up there'd be no one left.

We finished lunch, a few people left, but there was still a good crowd there, and I got up and gave my speech. I was a little anxious about it, but it seemed to go well. The people responded well. They smiled. They interrupted me to applaud a couple of times. And I sat down feeling pretty pleased with myself.

As soon as I sat down, the conference organizer stood up to the microphone and said, *We have truly saved the best for last!*

I thought, *Wow, that's really nice. I guess it really did go well.*

He said, *We have truly saved the best for last. I am now going to invite our NEA President, Reg Weaver, to come forward and give our closing remarks.*

So I am pleased today to know for sure that I have the last word.

One of the best jobs I ever had was when I was a tour guide at the Armstrong-Browning Library at Baylor University. This was my job for a few years while I was a student at Baylor.

Armstrong-Browning Library is not so much a library as it is a museum. It is the world's largest collection of materials related to Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the English poets. Not only is it this great collection, the building itself is really amazing.

Groups would come in there for tours. Senior citizens, schools, professors, all kinds of groups. Also, individuals would come for tours. And I would give these forty-five minute tours of this place.

My tour always started at the front doors of the building. I said something like this:

I'm sure you noticed as you walked into the library the bronze doors. They are solid bronze, weighing three-quarters of a ton each with ten panels on each door. Each panel represents a scene from Robert Browning's poetry.

The doors at the Armstrong-Browning Library at Baylor are modeled after a pair of doors in Florence, Italy. In the center of Florence there is an ancient building which sits opposite the Cathedral, the Duomo. The building is the Baptistry, octagonal

in shape, where the earliest Christian worship took place in Florence and where baptisms have occurred since the early middle ages.

People come to see the Duomo with its famous dome, and they come to see the great doors to the Baptistry. They are bronze, probably 10-12 feet high, and the individual panels depict scenes from the Old Testament and the life of Jesus.

These doors are said to be astounding. Every detail is in place: each panel tells an entire story with warmth and passion and humanness.

The doors are the work of a Florentine artist and sculptor, Lorenzo Ghiberti, who lived from 1378 until 1455. The amazing thing about Ghiberti's doors is the fact that he worked on them all his adult life. He received the commission when he was 25 and worked on the doors until he was 74— 49 years. Finally he stopped working on the doors and not long after, he died.

He did a lot of other things too. But the doors were his focus, the common thread that ran through his whole life.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to create something and at the end of the day, at the end of your life, be able to point to it and say, there—that is my life's work?

To be called out into the deep, to do your life's work.

John Buchanan, Editor and Publisher of *The Christian Century* and Pastor of Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church, puts it this way:

I think sometimes that the greatest gift of all is knowing what your life's work is and the privilege of being able to do it.

I know that the decision about what to do with your life is about the most important decision you and I ever make.

I know that many people, of all ages, are still trying to decide what to do with their life.

I know that the decision about what to do with your life isn't made once but that there is a sense in which we all make that decision over and over again.

I know also that people live lives of dull unhappiness, because the decision about what to do with their lives turned out not to be a good one and they don't know how to unmake it, or for a variety of reasons, cannot unmake it.

I know that the decision about what to do with your life is a religious decision whether or not you think of yourself as a religious person. Because the decision about your life's work is about your values, your ultimate values, and ultimate commitments, and ultimate beliefs about who God is and who you are, and what the meaning is of the whole enterprise of life.

And I do know that it is never, never too late for any of us to decide what our life's work is and to do it. To respond to the call to go out into the deep, to do your life's work.

Jesus has been teaching, healing, casting out demons, and drawing huge crowds throughout the Judean countryside. As today's lesson opens, he is at the Sea of Galilee, a few miles

west of Peter's home in Capernaum, where not long before, Jesus had healed Peter's mother-in-law.

Today the crowd has become so pressing that Jesus needs some distance. Commandeering one of the two boats that belongs to Peter and his partners, James and John, Jesus tells Peter to push him out away from the shore. There, Jesus sits in Peter's boat and begins to teach.

Finished teaching, he tells Peter to put out for deep water and again let down his nets. Exhausted from a fruitless night of fishing, Peter objects, says he's already tried that to no avail, but does as he is told, knowing it will be futile.

The result is, of course, the greatest catch of Peter's life. James and John appear with the second boat, but the catch is so massive that both boats are on the verge of sinking. The catch is so large that even all the available hands and both boats cannot deal with it.

One of the things we learn from the Gospels is that Jesus supplies abundance for God's people, whether that abundance takes the form of basketfuls of food for a hungry crowd, or like we looked at a couple of weeks ago, wine for a wedding, or fish for the fishers. So in some ways this story is another story about the abundant, extravagant grace of God.

But it is about more than that.

Peter knows this man standing with him in his boat, knee-deep in fish, is not just any man. Sinking to his knees, like a long line of others who have come into the presence of God before

and after him, Peter cries out, *Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.*

The first reaction of most people who are called by God to do something is reluctance. The authentic call of God in our lives has a way of lifting up our sense of not being worthy or up to it. This is true for most people I know, and it is true in the Bible.

Throughout the Bible, when human beings come into contact with the holy, their first reaction is to recoil because of a recognition of their own sinfulness.

When Isaiah was touched by God he cried out, *Woe is me!*

The apostle Paul exclaimed that he was *unfit to be called an apostle.*

Peter expresses this same fear that when the holy touches the unholy, the unholy will be destroyed. *Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.*

But it turns out that in the encounter with God, what is destroyed is the thing that has kept us separate from the holy. It is a death of the old but a birth of something new. In that moment we are sent forth anew—a new lease on life—, empowered by Christ.

[Dr. Fred Anderson, Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, New York]

So Peter recognizes that he is in the presence of the the holy, he recoils and says, *Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.*

But then Jesus send forth Peter anew, empowered. He says, *Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.*

This is literally what Jesus says, *catching people*—not “fishing for people” as in other accounts in other gospels. The word “catch” here in Luke is actually a rare Greek word in the New Testament that means “to capture alive” or “to spare life”.

So it is more in the sense of catching someone to save them from falling or drowning than to catch a fish with a hook. Jesus calls Peter to move from a life of catching fish which die to catching people who live. To “catch to live”, to bring people new life.

So Jesus says, *Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.* And then Luke ends the story this way: *And when Peter and the others had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.*

They left the nets full of fish. Kind of ironic. They get nothing all night and they faithfully return to the business by cleaning out the nets. Then they get a full haul in the day, which Jesus gives them, and then they turn around and leave it all behind to go and follow Jesus. They don’t follow Jesus because business is bad and they don’t have anything else to do; they follow Jesus precisely when it couldn’t be better. They abandon their fishing careers at the high point of their fishing careers.

Strange. This is what happens, though, when you are called out into the deep, to your life’s work. There’s no telling what you might do. There’s no telling what you might leave behind.

I wonder if anyone here has ever read the autobiography of Albert Schweitzer— *Out of My Life and Thought*. I had known a little about him— that he was a theologian and musician and served as a doctor in Africa. What I didn’t know was that he wasn’t a doctor until he felt God’s call to go to Africa and serve as a doctor there.

Here he was – an extraordinarily gifted organist, writer, preacher, and teacher – a person God was clearly using to do a lot of good in the world. But in the back of his mind, Schweitzer believed that when he reached the age of 30, he would be called into some kind of service which would more directly engage those in need. He tentatively explored various avenues as he neared that moment, but kept his mind open to God’s call.

When he happened on an article from a missionary in the Congo decrying the lack of medical doctors, he knew the call had come. No matter that he was not a doctor. No matter that he had never been to Africa. He heard Jesus speak his name, and the decision was made.

And so, against all logic, Schweitzer at age 30 enrolled in medical school so that he might follow Christ to Africa.

His studies were difficult, but not as difficult as explaining his decision to those around him. *I had hard battles to fight with my relatives and friends, he says. They said I was a man who was burying the talent entrusted to him... I ought to leave work among Africans to those who would not thereby abandon gifts and achievements in scholarship and the arts.*

In other words, he was too gifted to take this call to discipleship seriously. Too gifted to take this call to follow Jesus seriously.

In the many adversarial debates I had to endure with people who passed for Christians, it amazed me to see them unable to perceive that the desire to serve the love preached by Jesus may sweep a man into a new course of life. They read in the New Testament that it can do so, and found it quite in order there.

[Wendy Fambro, from a sermon preached at First Baptist Church, Ithaca, New York]

That's right. We read these calls to discipleship in the Bible, and, because it's in the Bible, we accept it as natural, logical, undeniable. When Matthew leaves his tax-collecting days behind him to follow Jesus, it makes sense to us. When Zacchaeus does essentially the same thing, we applaud him. And, when Peter witnesses the power of Jesus to change failure to success, to turn emptiness into abundance, we accept his decision to leave it all and follow.

In the Bible, it all seems inevitable, normal. But when it comes to someone we know, when it comes to me, when it comes to my son, my daughter, when it comes to my friends, it doesn't seem so acceptable, so normal, so expected.

Here's the thing: We often talk about inviting Jesus into our lives. The call to discipleship is *not* a decision to invite Jesus into our lives; it is actually the willingness to allow Jesus to call us out of our lives that we have chosen for ourselves.

I think sometimes we think that if we took Jesus up on his call that it would be something like a religious “bring our savior to work day,” where we ask Jesus to come along with us to work or wherever—“This is where we make our copies; here's the break room”—to accompany us through the life that we have chosen.

That's not it; discipleship is the decision to follow Jesus wherever he may lead and to change our lives accordingly.
[Thanks to Wendy Fambro for this insight]

I was at Baptist Hospital this week visiting somebody, and I noticed in one of the halls a saying that somebody had printed out on the computer and put on the wall next to others signs that said “Think Safety” and things like that. I couldn't remember the exact wording of the sign, but it prompted me to come up with my own saying:

Our greatest fear for our lives should not be that we fail at some important task but that we succeed at something that doesn't matter.

Ask Peter about that. I think he'd say that to fail when attempting something important, when attempting to do your life's work, is not the worst thing that can happen to you. It happened to him many times. What's worse would be to be successful at something insignificant.

To be the master of the insignificant. To be the most comfortable and confident person in the world—in the shallow end of the pool.

Jesus is still calling us to push out into deeper water and let down our nets.

What does that mean for you now?

Where is Jesus asking you to trust him and let down your nets?

What does Jesus want you to leave behind?

And where does he want you to follow him?

What is your life's work?