

**Sunday, September 19, 2004**

A Sermon Preached by  
The Reverend Dr. Thomas K. Tewell



## **Deep C**

**Luke 5:1-11**

Will You Pray With Me? Gracious God, in these brief moments pour through me the gift of preaching, that these words might truly be your Living Word to us and that they might call us out into the deep waters of discipleship following Jesus the Christ in whose strong name we pray. Amen.

“Hey Simon, let out your boats into the deep waters and then let out your nets for a catch.” I don’t know whether all of you in the congregation realize it, but two of our associate pastors, Rev. Randy Weber and the Rev. J. Oscar McCloud are both wonderful, experienced fishermen. What’s great about their fishing is that if the fish they catch are large, by the time they have finished describing them those fish are huge. They are expanding fish – it’s a wonderful thing.

A few years ago Rev. Weber and Dr. McCloud asked me to go deep-sea fishing with them and I was glad to accept. I’d never been deep-sea fishing. We had a wonderful time on the boat on the way out as we were gliding through the waters and engaged in conversation. It was all wonderful until we got out into the deep water and the motor was cut off and we were supposed to start fishing. The boat was rocking and rolling and rocking and rolling and my stomach was getting queasier and queasier. That was the day that Rev. Weber and Dr. McCloud and I discovered that we have a lot in common. Randy and Oscar caught 43 fish and I threw up 43 times. A fisherman I am not!

But Simon was a fisherman. And I think that’s why Jesus met him beside the Sea of Galilee, which Luke refers to as the Lake of Gennesaret. The other gospel writers call it the Sea of Tiberius. It was 13 miles long, 8 miles wide and 150,000 people lived in nine villages around it. Simon had been fishing all night and had caught nothing. Have you ever tried something and it didn’t work? You cast your nets out and nothing happened. You tried and you failed, or so you felt.

Simon not only had empty nets but he had an empty heart. He was discouraged and defeated. As he and

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James and John were cleaning their nets, Simon looked over and saw Jesus of Nazareth doing some teaching by the Sea of Galilee. Many of the 150,000 people from the villages around were pressing in on him. Jesus asked Simon if he might get into his boat and go out just a little way into the shallow water so that he could use the boat as a pulpit. Simon was glad to oblige. Simon was sitting in the back of the boat and he pushed out into the sea. Since he faced Jesus’ back, he could see the faces of the listeners. These people had come with more than empty nets. They had come with empty hearts and empty souls and minds. They were hungry and thirsty for something. They hung on Jesus’ every word. Simon could see their faces.

Jesus turned to Simon and said, “Hey Simon, put out into the deep water and then let out your nets for a catch.” Have you ever tried to do something as hard as you could over and over again? Then someone suggests that you do it one more time. Simon was not very excited about going through all of this again. I know people in this congregation who have sent out resumes – they want to change jobs or they’re out of work. They’ve networked with every conceivable person. Resumes have been sent out to more than 30 people a week for five weeks – 150 resumes or more. Then someone comes up and says, “Have you ever thought about networking? Have you thought of making a list of people you know and sending out your resume to them?” And you think, “Is he out of his mind? What does he think I’ve been doing? I’ve been networking, I’ve been sending out my resume.”

Simon was saying to himself, “Oh brother, he wants me to go out into the deep water. I have fished all night

and caught zero – not a single fish.” Simon is not happy about this. He doesn’t want to do it, but he’s not sure what he should do. It is interesting that in the story Simon uses these words: “But if you say so.” I wonder exactly how he said those words to Jesus. With a sigh: “We fished all night, we caught nothing,” (another sigh) “but if you say so.” Or sarcastically: “We fished all night and caught nothing, but if you say so we’ll go out!” It may not matter how he said it but the point is that he didn’t want to go. Exactly like you may not want to do something but you do it. So Simon did it.

Simon pushed off into the deep water. He knew he’d catch nothing – just as James and John and Dr. McCloud and Rev. Weber and other fishing experts in the congregation know when they are not going to make a catch. Simon knew that darkness is the time when the fish are coming. You fish in the dark because when the morning light shines into the water at an angle the fish disperse. He knew they were going to catch nothing. But nevertheless he did what Jesus asked him to do. He took his net and threw it over the side – knowing nothing was going to happen.

But the nets filled with fish. There were so many fish that Simon had to call his partners, James and John, and say, “Come, bring your boat,” and they let down their nets. There were so many fish in the nets that both boats were sinking. When Simon, who thought he knew so much about fishing, looked at Jesus of Nazareth he realized that Jesus had been teaching him. He said, “Get away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.” Is there anyone here who has ever felt God’s presence. Simon did and he felt unworthy. He felt inadequate. In that moment Jesus said, “Don’t be afraid Simon, from now on you’ll be catching people.”

The scripture says that when they brought their boats into shore, they put down their nets, left everything and followed Jesus. This morning very briefly I want to lift out of this very beautiful, simple, phenomenal, life-changing, transforming story three spiritual principles that can change your life if you let them.

### **Principle #1 – Jesus has an eye for opportunity**

A shoal of fish is about the same space as an acre of ground but filled with fish. That’s how big a shoal of fish is. Jesus didn’t create that shoal of fish, but he had an eye for it. He saw it. Simon, the professional, the expert, didn’t see it. He was blinded by exhaustion, blinded by discouragement, blinded by expertise. Sometimes it’s in the very area where we think we know the most that we actually need help. We say, “I don’t need your help, Jesus, in that area, thank you very much. I need your help in these other areas, but I’m doing fine in this area.”

It’s in that area that we may need Jesus the most. Where does Jesus want to give us an eye for opportunity – to see a difficult person with eyes of opportunity, to see a challenge with eyes of opportunity? Where does Jesus want us to see what we thought of as a dead end with eyes of opportunity? Jesus had an eye for opportunity. He saw what no one else saw. Do we have eyes of opportunity?

### **Principle #2 – God honors faithfulness**

Simon didn’t want to go into the deep water. He didn’t want to do it. Can we be honest enough to say that there are times in our life when we don’t want to do something? We don’t want to get up. We don’t want to go to work. Is there anybody here honest enough to say they maybe didn’t want to come to church this morning? Maybe you came with someone whom you’re staying with for the weekend and they promised you brunch at the Plaza Hotel at 12:30 but on the way to brunch you’ve got to go to church.

You didn’t care about going to church but you wanted the brunch at 12:30 and the only way to get it was by attending church first. You didn’t want to come but you came. God honors faithfulness even when our motives are mixed – even when we don’t want to do it. When you visit a sick friend in the hospital, or when you come here on Wednesday night at 6:30 to learn about the homeless, you may not be excited to do it, but God honors faithfulness. When we show up something happens. Remember that!

### **Principle #3 – Fishing is a metaphor for ministry**

Fishing was Simon’s life. He knew a lot about it, so Jesus came to him in a way he could understand. This is brilliant pedagogy – a great educational technique. Jesus was teaching about fishing for people and Simon got it! Jesus used the great catch as an illustration that Simon could understand and then Jesus said “Simon, from now on you and James and John and others are going to be fishing for people.”

Can I tell you the truth? I believe with all my heart that the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church of New York is being called by God to leave the shallow waters of shallow faith and to be led by Jesus Christ out into the deep waters of discipleship – deeper than we’ve ever been, to get way over our heads, out of our comfort zone and into new areas of ministry. This is why we have a Center for Christian Studies. The Center for Christian Studies offers us the opportunities to learn about the content of our Christian faith, to study the basics of Christian theology, to learn how to find things in the Bible, to understand how to live out our faith in

our work.

If we don't learn these things how can we articulate our faith? How can we talk about our faith with people who don't know Jesus Christ? How will we ever do that? Jesus is calling us out into the deep waters to fish for people. You always want to leave that job to the clergy but the truth is you are in settings where the clergy will never be. You're in corporate boardrooms. You're there when ethical decisions are being made in corporate America. You're there in hospitals when medical ethical decisions are being made. The clergy are not in those settings.

There's a young woman in this congregation who in a winsome, authentic way witnesses to her faith. Not long ago she was at a cigar bar several blocks from here. She's a very active member of our congregation and she was there sitting with colleagues from her work. They were celebrating and they had had one round of drinks and were about to have another. It was 20 minutes of seven and they ordered another drink for her. She said, "I can't have anymore. I've got to go. I've got a commitment." They asked, "Where are you going?" She gulped, perspired a little, and said, "Well, to be honest, I'm going to church." And they said, "To church? Get out, you don't go to church on a Wednesday night? Where are you really going? She said, "I'm going to church!" They asked incredulously, "Why are you going to church on a Wednesday night?"

Listen to her answer. "Because it makes a difference in the way I live my life." She didn't use any religious language. She just said it in everyday language. That young woman is so radiant in her faith. She has such contagious joy that she's even been bringing some people from that cigar bar to Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. We may have a new cigar bar ministry! Who knows? It's amazing the people that God is bringing here. If we take seriously what our signboard on Fifth Avenue says, "This is God's House. All are welcome." maybe we'll have a catch of "fish" but to do it we've got to go into the deep waters and let down our nets. We need to be willing to talk about our faith. Of course we, the clergy, have opportunities to talk about our faith but you have so many opportunities to share faith that we will never have. All of us have to go into the deep waters.

Oh I wish we had an hour to explore all the visions that I think God is giving to Fifth Avenue Church. Let me just say that I believe that it is time for us, every one of us, to get out of the shallow water and to go deeper. That's why I want you to take a Center for Christian Studies class. This has nothing to do with numbers. It has everything to do with getting equipped so we can share our faith with other people. That's what it's about. Oh there will be times when you won't want to go to class, but God honors faithfulness. Jesus has an eye for

opportunity. Look through the catalogue and pray to God, "Which class should I take?" It will equip us for ministry in this strategic location.

How many churches have the president of a nation like Madagascar here on a Sunday morning? Friends, God has given us this phenomenal location. Now we have a Christian education center below this sanctuary and wonderful new remodeled rooms. Do you know we might offer a conference for presidents like this one from Madagascar, a leader and a deacon in his church. We might offer a prayer conference or a conference on ethics and leadership. Maybe the President of Madagascar could join with me and others of our clergy and others from the United Nations, maybe Kofi Annan, at a conference on peacemaking right here at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. We could have conferences for congregations on homeless ministry. We could invite CEOs and presidents to join together with the poor and the middle class.

We could do all this in this congregation but to do it we got to go out into the deeper waters. Let me tell you when we go into the deeper waters we may feel over our heads. Look at our signboard, "This is God's house. All are welcome." Do we believe it? Can we be honest enough to say there are times when we mean it intellectually but the question is do we really understand the implications of it? Do we accept the implications of following Jesus deeper? This isn't just a call to more activity. It's not a call to be more frenzied. It's a call to go deeper with Jesus in prayer and study, so that when we reach out in service it has depth and meaning.

I want to close with a story that may hurt your ears and I warn you it's a tough story to hear but it's about ministry in this city. Philip Yancey is one of my favorite authors. I read everything he writes. I commend his work to you. A few years ago, Yancey wrote a book called What's So Amazing About Grace. In the beginning he tells the story of a young prostitute who came to see him. As he was talking to her, amid her sobs of shame and guilt, she blurted out that she was homeless, had no money or food and that she had a little child, a little daughter. Yancey was trying to figure out how to get her food and help. She was so ashamed. She said, "I hate to tell you what I've done. I've prostituted myself and I'm ashamed to admit it. But this is the hard part of the story. I found some people to whom I could sell my little daughter. They will pay more for her for one hour than they'll pay for me for one or two nights. What could I do? I had to support my drug habit. I had to feed my daughter. What could I do? I did it and I'm so ashamed."

Philip Yancey was beside himself. What do you say to such a woman? Finally he just asked, "Have you been to a church? Have you been to see a pastor?" She looked at him incredulously. "A church", she said, "Why would I

go to a church. I already feel so miserable about myself. Why would I go there? They'd only make me feel worse."

Do we mean what's on our signboard? "This is God's house. All are welcome." What if that mother and her child came in these doors? Would we welcome them with the grace and love of God? Can I be honest enough to say that this building program, this air-conditioning, the handicapped accessibility, this new Christian education center, the renovation and remodeling is not about us. It's about mission in the world. It's about opening our doors so people like that mother and that young daughter can come in here and experience the unconditional love and the grace of a God who can transform their lives and give them a whole new beginning.

But if we're going to go out into the deep waters we can't be a church where some go to classes and some don't, where some read their Bible and some don't, where some pray and others don't. We can't be a church where some pledge and some don't pledge, where some want to mature and others don't want to mature. We

can't do that any more. If we're going to follow God's vision into the future, into the deep waters, then all of us, have to follow Jesus into the deep waters whether we want to go or not. Remember, God honors faithfulness. God has an eye for opportunity. We will see that fishing is a metaphor for ministry. We were put here on this corner to minister to the people of Madagascar and to the homeless, to the people at the cigar bar and to people like that prostitute and her daughter.

I just close with a thought. Jesus is calling us into deep waters. "Hey Simon, go into the deep waters and put down your nets for a catch." Mamy, Freida, Mike, Amanda, Bob, will you put out your nets into the deep waters? Will you let them down for a catch? If you do, get ready because God has in store for us the surprise of our lives. Amen.

Dr. Tewell's sermons are available on CD or cassette tape .  
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