

Charged Up
Brookfield Congregational Church
Rev. Kathleen Rinear
September 19, 2010
Luke 5:1-11

Maybe it was a warm fall morning. The sun was shining down and the people were warming up to the preacher and miracle worker coming down to the lakeshore to teach.

Peter, the fisherman, watched as Jesus approached. Peter liked the preacher—had seen firsthand how the man could heal sick people. In fact, Jesus had cured Peter’s own mother-in-law. Normally, Peter would have been happy to see the rabbi.

But on this warm fall morning, Peter was tired and his back ached from a night of lowering and dragging the nets. Now, as he washed the heavy nets, the sun’s warmth made his task a little easier, but it could not warm his spirits after such an awful night. Up and down the lake they had trawled without catching a fish—not a single, stinking fish!

Jesus asked to borrow the boat as a kind of makeshift pulpit. “Fine,” Peter said. “You might as well use it for speaking. It isn’t any good for fishing!” And he went back to rinsing his fishnets while Rabbi Jesus talked to the crowds.

But then Rabbi Jesus spoke to Peter again, “Peter, let’s put out into deep water and catch some fish.”

Now there were at least two things wrong with this advice: It was midday—the worst possible time to catch fish on the Sea of Galilee. When the sun was high overhead, the fish went deeper into the water. They would not be near enough to the surface for the drag nets to catch them—especially in deep water.

Well—what could you expect? Jesus was a carpenter and a teacher—not a fisherman.

Peter may have said something a little salty to Rabbi Jesus, something like, “Sure, why not? I’ve got nothing better to do when I’m tired and hungry than go back out onto the lake in the heat of the day when there aren’t going to be any fish!”

Crazy. Crazy. But Jesus just looked at Peter with those eyes that seemed to look right into your soul and he spoke in that gentle voice that people—including Peter—found so hard to resist.

And we know what happened next. Two boats put out into deep water, and they caught so many fish the boats were nearly swamped. Peter was so overwhelmed by the experience that he dropped to his knees and told Jesus to get away from him for he was a sinful man.

In response, Jesus told Peter and his companions not to be afraid, that they would become fishers of people. And they brought their boats to shore, dropped their nets and their old life and followed after the teacher.

Now if you and I were members of an evangelical denomination, I might launch at this point into a sermon about catching people for Christ like Peter and the other disciples did. I could say something about how we have to make sure there's good bait on the hook and strong enough line to land souls for Jesus—like I did with the kids.

But we're not going to do that. Instead, we're going to focus on a scene near the beginning of Luke's story, in which Peter is tending his empty nets after a long and frustrating night of failure. We're going to focus on that scene, because there are a lot of people who are like Peter. They're fishing for something, but they aren't catching anything, and their lives are like empty fish nets. Maybe these people are reasonably successful. Maybe the world doesn't see these people as having empty fish nets at all; maybe the world sees a nice home, nice family, nice car, nice job, nice life.

Peter's life is like that. He's had a bad night, but he's a successful man. He has a good trade, one that supports his family. He has a wife and a mother-in-law, perhaps even children. We know he has a home, because Jesus has visited him there.

So what possesses a man to suddenly drop his reasonably successful life and go traipsing after a wonder-working rabbi?

The answer lies in that picture of Peter bent over his empty fishing nets. He is doing what he has done hundreds of times since he first followed his father onto a boat and out on to the Sea of Galilee. It is good, honest, hard work—and Peter has a right to feel pride in it.

But there is a question in Peter's mind. I know it's there because I know he would not have followed after Jesus unless he was struggling with that question.

How many of you have children? Do you remember when your children were small—some of you may have children of this age now—do you remember when your children dogged you every waking minute of the day with one persistent, constant question: “Why?”

You remember! You ask little Joey to pick up his clothes and he looks at you and says, “Why?” And you say, “Because I don’t like clothes in the middle of the floor.” And he says, “Why?” “Because it doesn’t look nice.” “Why?” Why is the sky blue? Why does that man have a bandage on his eye? Why can’t I have an ice cream now? Why are we going to the store? Why? Why? Why?

“Why?” is the ultimate existential question. Nearly every human being asks, at some point in his or her life, “Why am I here? What does my life mean?”

The emptiness in Peter’s life is not a lack of fish. His life feels empty because he does not have an answer to that existential question: what is the meaning of my life? He follows after Jesus because Jesus gives him a reason for existing: Come follow me and I will make you fish for people.

You and I have that same existential question. We want to know why we were born. We want to know that our lives have some meaning. We want to know that our lives will make a difference in the world.

Our human craving for meaning has been explored in depth by Viktor Frankl, a Jewish psychotherapist. Frankl was a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps. In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, a book many regard one of the most important of the 20th century, Frankl wrote about how he found the will to live in horrific circumstances.

Frankl wrote that a person who knows the purpose—the “why”—of his or her life can cope with almost any situation—even a concentration camp where life is a daily battle against disease, death and despair.

According to Frankl, the “why” of our life is a unique calling that each of us has been given. No one else is given the exact same calling, and no one else can fulfill our purpose in life. In other words, you have been uniquely created with a calling that is yours and yours alone.

That day beside the Sea of Galilee, Peter found his unique calling in following Jesus.

Just in case you think this idea of calling is only for people in the Bible like Peter or people in extraordinary circumstances like Viktor Frankl, let me tell you about an ordinary person who found his unique purpose in life. This story comes from the book, *When the Game Is Over, It All Goes Back in the Box*, by Presbyterian minister John Ortberg.

This is the story of Johnny the Grocery Store Bagger. One day, Johnny went to a training seminar at his grocery store led by motivational speaker Barbara Glanz. Her topic was on making a difference in the world.

Barbara told the group that every interaction with another person is a chance to make a difference in that person's life. After her talk, she gave everyone her phone number and an invitation to call her if anyone wanted to talk more about the seminar.

About a month later, Barbara got a call from Johnny. Johnny told her that he had Down's syndrome and that he worked as a bagger at the grocery store. He told her that he liked her talk, but at first he couldn't think of a way he could make a difference in people's lives.

Then he had an idea. He decided that every night when he came home from work, he would find a positive "thought for the day," some reminder of how good it is to be alive, how each of us has gifts to share. If he couldn't find anything, he would make it up.

Every night after that, he found a saying. His dad helped him use the computer to enter the saying six times on a page. Then Johnny would print out fifty copies of the page, carefully cut out three hundred slips of paper with the saying printed on them, and then sign each one.

Johnny took his stack of sayings to work and put them next to him at the check-out lane. Every time he bagged someone's groceries, he would put a copy of a saying on top of the last bag. Then he would look right at the shopper and say: "I've put a great saying in your bag. I hope it helps you have a good day. Thanks for coming here."

A month later, the store manager called Barbara Glanz and told her, "You won't believe what's happening!" The lines at Johnny's checkout lane were backing halfway around the store. When the manager called more clerks to the front, people refused to go into the open lanes. They told him, "That's okay. We want to go through Johnny's line."

It wasn't the sayings themselves that people found so compelling; it was that Johnny had taken the time and effort to make their day a little brighter.

Peter the Fisherman, Viktor Frankl the concentration camp survivor and Johnny the Bagger all had something in common: a mission in life. So how do you and I go about finding our unique calling?

For the past several days, as I've worked on this message, this is the point at which I've become stuck. I consulted my sources; scratched my head; wrote words that didn't seem to say anything very meaningful.

Sometime between four and five o'clock this morning, I understood why.

Finding and fulfilling one's purpose is at the very heart of what it means to be human. Trying to lay out how to do that in 15 to 20 minutes is like trying to cram a lifetime's worth of clothing into an overnight bag. It just won't fit.

There are whole books written on the subject of call. Victor Frankl's book is one example. Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* is another. So is the book by John Ortberg where I found the story of Johnny the Bagger.

And then there's this book—the Bible. From beginning to ending, Genesis to Revelation, this is a book about call: the call of Adam and Eve, of Noah, and Abraham and Sarah, of Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Deborah, Ruth, and Esther, of Samuel and Eli, David and Solomon, Sampson and Daniel, Jonah and Elijah and Elisha, Mary and Joseph, John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter and James and John, Mary Magdalene and Paul. Nearly every story in the Bible is a story about call.

As we begin our journey together, we can lay down some general principles. Last week, I said that we are designed for community. This week, I have said that each of us is created for a unique purpose. Next week, John will talk about the power that allows us to fulfill our purpose.

It will take all the time that we have been given—however many years we walk together—to flesh out this bare outline of our faith: designed for community, created for call, empowered for commitment.

But for this week, we must be content to stand on the lakeshore with Peter, bent over our empty fishing nets, listening to the voice of Jesus calling us to follow. We don't know where we're going. We don't know what we'll do separately and together to follow his call. We're just here on the lakeshore, getting ready to go. Amen.

For further reading on the subject of calling, the following books are available in the Brookfield Public Library:

Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2006 (There are many other editions available.)

John Ortberg, *When the Game Is Over, It All Goes Back in the Box*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007

Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2002