

**“Left Behind”**  
**Text: Luke 5:1-11**  
**The Reverend Christopher A. Henry**  
**Morningside Presbyterian Church**  
**Atlanta, GA**  
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*He said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”*  
*Luke 5:4*

Not long ago, at a preaching workshop in Cherry Log, Georgia, I had the opportunity to hear the great preacher Fred Craddock tell the story of the time he *almost* met Albert Schweitzer. Schweitzer, the great German-French theologian, biblical scholar, doctor, and humanitarian, was also a renowned organist. In 1949, when Craddock was a college student, he received the news that Schweitzer was coming to the United States for the first time and that he was planning to give an organ recital at a church in Cleveland, Ohio. This was just the chance Craddock had been waiting for; he had just finished reading Schweitzer’s controversial book, “The Quest of the Historical Jesus,” and he had a legal pad filled with critiques of the author’s work. His most pressing concern, the one that drove all his questions, was that Schweitzer’s scholarly search for the Jesus of history left the reader with no reason to worship. “Not enough Jesus to believe in”, he wrote on his legal pad, and Craddock bought a bus ticket to Cleveland, where he would confront Albert Schweitzer and his watered-down 20<sup>th</sup> century liberal protestant theology. Craddock arrived at the church just in time for the organ recital, but he wasn’t interested in the beautiful architecture or the sacred music masterfully played. All through the recital, Craddock was anxiously waiting for his moment to take Schweitzer to task for his paper-thin Jesus.

Finally, the concert ended and the audience was invited to join Dr. Schweitzer downstairs for refreshments. Craddock ran down to the gathering space and found a seat on the front row, center. Legal pad full of questions in his now anxiously shaking hands. It was then that Albert Schweitzer entered the room. “He was 75 years old, and much taller than I had expected,” Craddock says, “Fuzzy face, bushy hair, French accent.” Schweitzer stepped to the podium: “I appreciate the hospitality of you all and of this church. I’d like to stay longer and take questions, but I can’t. My patients in Africa need me. They are dying, children and their mothers and fathers, dying at home. I have to go. But if you have the love of Jesus in your heart, maybe you will come with me?” With that, Schweitzer walked out of the room. Craddock looked down at his legal pad filled to the margins with suddenly irrelevant criticism of this faithful saint and his theology.<sup>1</sup>

There is something about our faith that must be lived in order to be understood. There is something about these sacred stories of scripture that call us beyond passive disinterested reading and into a redefined sense of reality.

Take for example our gospel text this morning from the fifth chapter of Luke. It is one of those stories of the life and ministry of Jesus that, on the surface, is easy to understand. It is a story about evangelism. I remember very well as a child in Sunday school hearing this story and then being told that we are all called to be “fishers of men,” to go out into the wide sea of the world and let down our nets for a catch. Like the disciples, we are commanded by Jesus to be soul-catchers, evangelists. On the surface, it is a good and true reading of this story. Just as the story of the Good Samaritan reminds us to be kind to strangers in need and the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand instructs us to share our bread.

But perhaps there is something deeper happening in this sacred story that begins with Jesus standing on the edge of the lake and ends with a group of fishermen leaving everything they own and all that they know behind to follow a man whom they have just met. Maybe it is more than the thrilling appeal of evangelism that calls Simon Peter and his friends to an entirely new way of life.

The gospel writer Luke gives us a clue to this in the way he describes the dialogue between Simon and Jesus. Jesus has just finished teaching and speaking to the growing crowds of people from out on the boat, and he turns to Simon and he says, “Put out into the *deep* water for a catch.” Simon’s response had to be one of restrained frustration. “Sir, we have been fishing all night and have caught nothing.” In other words, “Listen buddy, we do this for a living, not just on the weekends. Maybe you should head back to the carpentry shop.” And yet, Simon chooses to row out into the deep water, and the rest is history. Nets bursting and boats sinking with fish, Simon falling on his knees before Jesus, the disciples called and commissioned for ministry, everything left behind as they follow him. Everything left behind. Nets and boats and a fresh catch of fish. Families and careers and a lifetime of training. Safety, comfort, and a stable life.

But first, before the catch, before the confession, before the call, these fishermen must leave something less tangible behind. The decisive moment comes when Simon agrees to leave the shore behind and venture into deep water. With that, he and the other disciples make the decision to leave behind preconceived notions and engrained ideas. It is this leap of faith, this decision to trust, that makes everything else possible. It starts with leaving the shallow waters of “that’s the way it works, that’s the way it has always worked” and entering the deep wells of new possibility.

There is a lesson for us here.

At no time in the history of the Christian church has the danger of shallow faith been more pressing. As one theologian has said, “The passionate call of Christ is often trivialized into an invitation to join a religious club that meets for tea and conversation [or entertainment] on Sundays.”<sup>iii</sup>

Aren’t we all searching for something more than this? Something deep and life changing? Some encounter with holiness and significance? This is why you have chosen to be in this sanctuary instead of taking in eight hour of Super Bowl pre-game

shows. This is why we gather monthly around this sacred table to be renewed and challenged. Something deeper is happening here.

Please note that Jesus does not offer these fishermen seven easy steps to successful living or a simple playbook for happiness. What he offers is a bewildering, challenging, frustrating call to depth. I think of Madeline L'Engle, one of the deepest religious thinkers I know of, who wrote: "Those who believe they believe in God but without passion in the heart, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, and even at times without despair, believe only in the idea of God, and not in God (himself)."<sup>iii</sup>

Several years ago, I was attending a Sunday afternoon book club in a small town in northern North Carolina. The participants in the club were the pastors and lay leaders of local congregations, Episcopalians, Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, and Presbyterians. We found ourselves sharing personal stories of faith formation. How did you become a Christian? One by one, members of the group described how we had been raised by loving and faithful parents who brought us to Sunday school and church, told us the stories of Jesus, and helped us to grow in maturity of faith. Each story sounded something like that, until there was only one person left to speak. As tears formed in her eyes, she said, "I am a Christian because the Christian church saved my life." Suddenly, we were in very deep theological waters. The woman described that she had been abandoned by her parents as an infant. Sent to a foster home, she was physically abused for the first six years of her life. At age seven, she was adopted by a local family. Not knowing what to expect, she spent the first night wide awake in her new bed, afraid and anxious. The next morning, a Sunday, the family got up early, had breakfast, and got into the car.

"It was my first time at church and I had no idea what to expect. We walked into the Sunday school classroom, and the teacher's face lit up. 'Welcome, Janet, we've been waiting for you' Then she read the Bible story for the day. I will never forget it. Jesus says to his disciples, 'Let the little children come to me. Do not stop them' I knew, knew with all of my heart, that he was talking about me. I knew that I was home. I am a Christian because of that moment.

Cast your net out deeper.

We can choose to skim the surface of faith, to take in a little here and there, say our prayers and come to church and check the boxes on our religious to do list. Or we can go deep. We can live into the profound promises of faith and we can get lost in the words of scripture. The greatest challenge to theological depth in our churches today is not biblical illiteracy. It's not that we don't know how to read the Bible. It is, instead, biblical dust-gathering. Deep faith requires study, prayer, and practice. It requires leaving behind surface level assumptions of scripture in favor of deep pools of engagement. We must reclaim these sacred stories of faith and rescue them from interpretations that privilege hatred or division or exclusion or self-righteousness. We can only counter such destructive use of the Bible if we know what the book really does

say. Our effectiveness in spreading the news of a loving and gracious God is entirely dependent on how deep we are willing to go.

If you have come to church this morning expecting to hear my reflections on the Left Behind series of fictional books that have sold over sixty-five million copies in the United States, we'll have to save that for another week. What I have in mind this Sunday is the shrinking sight of the shoreline and shallow waters as those disciples leave them behind forever. What I have in mind is the transformed lives of those fishermen after their encounter with the sacred.

It is time that churches like ours demonstrate to the world that there are deeper wells of religious commitment than the shallow pools of small-minded pronouncements that flood our senses. We owe it to this city and this culture. We owe it to those who long for something more and aren't satisfied by trivial superficiality. We owe it to the one who calls us to a faith of profound depth.

On second thought, maybe this story from Luke is about evangelism. Becoming fishers of people. But, in order to fill the nets, we're going to have to leave the shore behind in search of deeper waters. And the time has come for us to dive in.

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<sup>i</sup> I heard Dr. Craddock tell this wonderful story at a preaching workshop at Cherry Log Christian Church in the fall of 2007.

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. p. 182.

<sup>iii</sup> Madeline L'Engle, *Walking On Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*, Shaw Books (5<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2001).