

More of You, Less of Me

Laurie Haas



Luke 5:1-11

They left everything and followed him. Everything? Luke says, “everything.” That’s quite the fishing story. My experience of fishing I’m afraid is limited to sitting on a dock in northwest Montana with my dad--casting a small hook with a wiggly worm into the cool waters of Echo Lake. My eyes were fixed on the little red bobber just hoping a sunfish would fall for my trick, gobble down the worm and try to swim away. Of course he would pull my bobber under water, giving me the signal that I had a fish on the line and I could reel him in for dinner. If the bobber just floated on the surface without a dip, for any more than 5 or 10 minutes, I was pretty much done fishing. Not my idea of a fun sport or hobby. So if Jesus were to come up to me and say, “Laurie, don’t be afraid, from now on you will be catching people.” I would have gladly set down my pole and followed Jesus right then and there. You see, I didn’t have much invested in fishing.

Simon Peter, though is another story. He and his companions, James and John are professional fishermen. They own boats; they provide for their families with the fish they catch; this is who they are. Their identity is closely tied to their profession. And we are much the same, aren’t we?

When we meet someone new, after we learn their name, one of those first questions we often ask is, “So what do you do?” Or if they are retired, we ask, “So what did you do before you retired?” This simple question gets to the heart of who someone is. It implies that our occupation is our identity. And many times it is. In fact, I read that retirement is difficult for many people because they gave so much of themselves to their jobs that they didn’t have the time or energy to develop other interests. Their job gave their life meaning, and not having that can be the worst stress of all.

So for Simon Peter and the boys to walk away from their

career, their job...that part of ourselves that is woven into the fabric of our being makes this a remarkable story. That departure from their profession, made them a bit smaller.

Less of me, more of him.

I’m not sure that these fishermen were leaving behind any hobbies, because I don’t think leisure time had been invented yet. The majority of their time was spent at the base of Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs: trying to satisfy their basic physiological needs and safety needs. But they did leave behind their possessions. Again, in first century Palestine, their possessions are a far cry from the mountain of stuff we accumulate today, but these men did walk away from their boats and nets and that huge catch of fish.

This sounds impossible—to walk away from our possessions. I don’t know about you, but I’ve got some good stuff. And maybe it is impossible to walk away or let go of our stuff, without first having an encounter with Christ. Jesus, the part-time preacher, part-time carpenter tells the experienced, professional fishermen to go out deep and let their nets down. Can’t you just see Peter rolling his eyes, “Umm Master Carpenter, Master Preacher, we’ve worked all night long and have caught nothing. Zippo. Nada. In fact, we’ve already fished those waters—where you’re trying to send us.

But perhaps there was something in the teaching that Jesus did that day from Peter’s boat that caused Peter to trust him and to obey, because Peter says, “Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” And we know what happened. A huge, unbelievable miracle...of fish...so many fish in fact, they begin to sink both of the boats.

And in that moment, Peter knows the Kingdom of God is right there in the boat with him. Peter responds by falling down at Jesus’ knees, saying “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” To encounter God, one encounters her own sinfulness, her own inadequacy, her own limitations.

Less of me, more of him

In that moment, Peter knew that his possessions meant nothing in comparison to this opportunity to follow Christ, to be with Christ...enveloped in his love. The same power that prompted Simon to fall at Jesus’ knees now lifts him into God’s service...leaving everything else behind.

But leaving everything sounds like such an overwhelming sacrifice doesn’t it? When we hear the word sacrifice, we often think of completely selfless acts in which someone does something for another entirely for the other person’s benefit. The image of a soldier sacrificing his life for his comrades frequently comes to mind.

But sacrifice isn’t purely altruistic. The best definition of sacrifice is this: “To forfeit something for something else considered to have a greater value.” For example, wouldn’t we let go of an earthly possession, “where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal;” (Matthew 6:19) in order to grab onto the hand of Christ?

Do you remember the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*? Elsa, the beautiful Nazi woman, is dangling over the abyss; one of her hands is held by Indy while she grasps with the other to reach the Holy Grail, which is just out of reach. Believing she can have the grail and walk away with her life as well, she refuses to choose and give Indiana her other hand. By valuing the Holy Grail more, she actually loses her life as she can’t hang on with one hand and she plummets to her death. Indiana Jones almost suffers the same fate; as

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his dad holds onto him, he too reaches for the grail. But he listens to the advice of his father, and he sacrifices the thing that is worth less—the artifact—for the thing that he values more—his life and the chance for another adventure.

Following Jesus is definitely an adventure. Even so, if you’re like me, you may still squirm just a bit and wonder how this passage applies to us today, on January 22, 2017 in Sarasota Florida? Is God really calling me to leave everything?

Not to let us all off the hook so easily, but I wonder if it might depend upon our own personal encounter with

Christ? There was something so compelling about the encounter with Jesus that in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, the fisherman don’t give even give it a second thought and they are leaving everything and following him.

James Barnett is a young man who grew up in a Christian family in Boynton Beach Florida. He went to church on Sundays, youth group on Wednesday night and he went on mission trips in high school and even in college. He was a great kid, a good Christian who really didn’t make bad choices. James did service work and even volunteered at homeless shelters, but he couldn’t get past the feeling that something was missing.

He had graduated from Florida State University and took a job with J.P. Morgan Chase, making almost a six-figure salary, but he wasn’t happy. He called a buddy he knew was taking a mission trip to Latin America, he took a few days off of work and three weeks later he was on a plane heading to Nicaragua.

James Barnett’s encounter with Christ came through a Jamaican prophetess named Mrs. Ruby, on a city dump in Nicaragua. This dump, called La Chureca is the final destination for most of the city’s garbage, including

mountains of fecal matter, medical waste and battery acid. Hundreds of people live inside the dump, where families construct their homes out of the trash. Mrs. Ruby had come to live among the poorest of the poor, praying over them and speaking to them on God’s behalf.

On his last day in Nicaragua, James went to the prophetess for a prayer and blessing. As James knelt on the floor of her home just outside the gates of the dump, she poured oil over his head and began speaking in tongues. (This was way outside of his normal church experience, by the way.)

James said, “I was expecting something transformational. I mean, how often do you get outside of the country to be prayed over by a prophetess in the middle of a dump?”

Finally, the Mrs. Ruby fell silent. She looked at James and said, “Child, the Lord wants you to know you have not been obedient.” James was furious. He had worked so hard to live a good life; he didn’t understand how he had not been obeying.

“My child,” she said calmly, “your obedience isn’t defined by what you don’t do, but by what you do for the world your God so loved.” Listen to that again: “your obedience isn’t defined by what you don’t do, but by what you do for the world your God so loved.”

Slowly, James began to feel convicted that there was a difference between admiring Christ and following him.

Think of when you admire someone. An admirer reads about the person, hangs pictures, wears jewelry, dreams about them and maybe even writes about them. But there usually is a certain distant, isn’t there. Compare that to a follower. A follower packs a bag and goes on the road with them. And remember, Jesus calls us to travel light...

Less of me, more of him.

So James Barnett’s encounter with Christ, caused him to come home and quit his job. He talked to his family, who gave their blessing and he sold all of his stuff and became homeless...for two years. He became the poor, so he could learn to love them and learn from them and then serve them.

Today James has a non-profit organization called Clothe Your Neighbor As Yourself. He now lives in a parsonage in Melbourne FL where 70-plus kids call him their youth pastor. Others call him a saint. Some call him crazy. But the homeless who James met along his journey will always call him by the nick name they gave him on the streets: Mr. Butters—because as they say, “he spreads the love like he spreads the butter.”

When Jesus calls us to leave everything and follow him, He is always calling us on an adventure and He is always calling us to something better. Jesus may disrupt family structures and patterns of working and living, but he does so not to destroy, but to renew and to make room for more of him, which means to have room for more love.

Kathy Fletcher and David Simpson had their family dinner table disrupted. They have a son named Santi, who went to Washington, D.C., public schools. Santi had a friend who sometimes went to school hungry. So Santi invited him to occasionally eat and sleep at his house.

That friend had a friend and that friend had a friend, and now when you go to dinner at Kathy and David’s house on Thursday nights there might be 15 to 20 teenagers crammed around the table, and later there will be groups of them crashing in the basement or in the few small bedrooms upstairs. It’s unusual for them to have a bed at home.

The kids who show up at Kathy and David’s have endured the ordeals of modern poverty: homelessness, hunger, abuse, sexual assault. Almost all have seen death firsthand — to a sibling, friend or parent.

A 21-year-old woman came to dinner one week and said this was the first time she’d been around a family table since she was 11. Dinners are served family-style. Cellphones are banned because Kathy wants everyone to be present, to “be in the now.”

They give young people a gift — complete intolerance of social distance. When a new visitor first met Edd, a regular diner, she held out her hand to shake his. He looked at it and said, “We hug here.”

Kids come to dinner at Kathy and David’s because they are hungry for something beyond food. Each meal they go around the table and everybody has to say something nobody else knows about them. They also have a chance to share their gifts, like poetry, music or storytelling.

The kids need what all adolescents need: bikes, laptops and a listening heart. After a cry on the couch, one young woman told Kathy, “Thank you for seeing the light in me.”

Bill Milliken, a veteran youth activist, is often asked which programs turn around kids’ lives. He says, “I still haven’t seen one program change one kid’s life. What changes people is relationships. Somebody willing to walk through the shadow of the valley of adolescence with them.”

Souls are not saved in bundles...but rather one person at a time. And Love is the necessary force.

Sometimes Kathy and David are asked how they ended up with so many kids flowing through their house. They look at how many kids are out there, and respond, “How is it possible you don’t?”

By having less of the traditional “family” dinner time, they made room for more love. Less of me, more of him.

So what about you? What about me? As we try to live into our Mission Statement at Church of the Palms to Love God and Love Neighbor, is there something we need to let go of or to make smaller in our lives, so there is more room for Jesus, more room for love? What might we need to leave behind so we can follow Christ more closely?

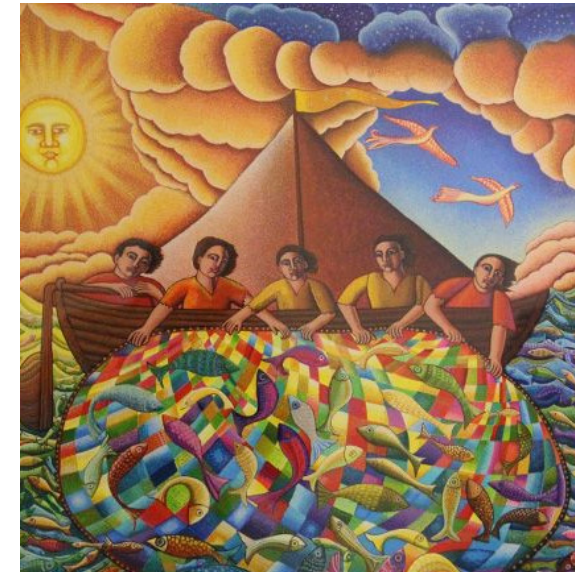
You see, I don’t believe that Jesus is calling us to abandon those we love, our families, our communities, or our work—whether it is volunteer or paid. But I know that Jesus intends for us to have a life that is filled with love, forgiveness and service to others. Make no mistake, when Jesus is calling us to fish for people, it starts in our own fishing hole, one relationship at a time.

Mother Teresa didn’t look at the masses of people. She looked at the person in front of her. One face, one smile, one person at a time.

Jesus calls us to live our lives, care for our families, engage in our work, our community, and our church in such a way that following Christ and living as his disciples is at the very center and heart of everything we do. And maybe what Jesus is calling us to leave behind are our feelings of pride, control and judgment, so we make more room for his love.

God so loved all of the people in this world, that his Son left everything to become small like us.

An encounter with Christ is an invitation to an abundant life where we don’t become big. But we become small, so we can love more.



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Church of the Palms

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