

## “A True Fish Story” Luke 5:1-11

Almost everyone knows that Samuel Langhorne Clemens achieved great fame by writing books like *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* under the name Mark Twain. But did you know that he was an avid fisherman?

Like most fishermen, Twain loved to tell anyone who would listen about how many he had caught and the ones that got away. And apparently, he didn't mind going on fishing trips even when it was not fishing season.

Once, he was riding on a train returning home from just such a trip way up in Maine. The fishing season in Maine had been closed for several weeks. But as he sat in one of the train cars thinking about all the fish iced down in the baggage car, he couldn't keep from striking up a conversation with the man sitting next to him and telling him about his success.

As he kept on talking about all the fish he had caught while in Maine, he noticed that his neighbor looked grim and did not smile or laugh at his tales. “*By the way,*” Twain eventually asked, “*who are you? What do you for a living?*”

“*Well, I'm the state game warden,*” the man told him. “*And who are you?*”

Twain just about swallowed the cigar that he was smoking. “*Well, to be perfectly truthful, warden,*” he said, “*I'm just the biggest liar in the United States!*”<sup>1</sup>

I wonder if Simon Peter was already coming up with a big fish tale to tell everyone as he made his way back to shore one morning. The truth was that he and his partners, James and John, had gone out fishing on the Sea of Galilee and they had not caught a thing. Not even so much as a nibble.

So they decided to call it a day. They were through. They had had it. They were giving up. This fishing trip had been a failure. They would have to make up something good to tell everyone if they wanted to have anything to tell at all.

But what happened next topped every fish story ever told. As usual, Jesus had drawn a crowd by the lakeside. He had become pretty popular at that time. Everybody was flocking around him.

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<sup>1</sup> *Homiletics Magazine*, January-February, 2007.

However, the crowd was *so* huge that not everyone could see him or hear him. So Jesus had an idea. He spotted the fishing boats coming in to dock. And he climbed into Simon's boat and asked if he would put out a short distance from the shore. That way, the whole lot of them could see and hear him as he spoke.

Now, Simon was probably tired and hungry and discouraged. He had put in a full day's work already and was prepared to kick off his sandals and rest for a while. He was most likely not in any mood for more rowing and paddling and steering.

Nevertheless, for some reason, Simon did as Jesus asked. Maybe, he felt as if he should help Jesus since Jesus had just helped his family by healing his mother-in-law of a terrible fever. Maybe, it was his way of returning a favor.

Or maybe, he felt bad for all those people and just wanted to help *them* by making sure that they could see and hear. Maybe, he just wanted to hear Jesus for himself.

Whatever his reason, Simon did what Jesus asked.

Then, after Jesus had finished speaking, he asked Simon to do something else. Jesus wanted him to steer the boat back out into the deep water and cast the nets back out into the sea. And Simon again did what Jesus asked.

That in itself may be as incredible as anything else in this story. For those fishermen had fished all night long with no success. And Jesus urges Simon to try one more time.

Simon's muscles were sore. His body ached. He was bone-weary. He thought that he was finished. He had given his best and nothing had come of it. Time to call it quits.

And Jesus' request just didn't make any sense at all. Simon could have told Jesus that this would be another futile effort. After all, the best time for fishing had come and gone. The best hours for fishing were before sunrise in the predawn darkness not when the sunlight drove the fish back down toward the bottom of the lake.

*"Master,"* Simon says, *"we have worked all night long but have caught nothing."*

What he means is that he believes that casting the nets again is a waste of time. What he means is that he believes that they will just come up empty again. What he means is that he expects that this will just be more of the same old, same old.

***“If you say so,” he tells Jesus. I imagine that Simon sounded a little like my parents did whenever I would tell them that I was going to be a superhero when I grew up. “If you say so, son,” Or maybe, he sounded a little like my wife when I tell her that the peanut butter and cheese sandwiches that I used to make taste pretty good. “If you say so, dear,”***

**Simon was not at all sold on this idea. He was pessimistic about how things were going to turn out.**

**And we understand where Simon is coming from. His point of view makes perfect sense to us, right?**

**Why keep on doing something if it isn't paying any immediate dividends? Why try something again if it didn't work the first time? Or the second time? Or the third time? Or the fourth time? Isn't that the definition of insanity?**

**Why expend time and energy when things never seem to get any better? When things never seem to change? We too can be pessimistic about the way things are going to turn out.**

**If you remember the old children's stories about Winnie the Pooh, you may remember a character called Eeyore. Eeyore was a gloomy, but lovable, old, gray, donkey who was always certain that things would turn out for the worst. One passage from one of the books will give you some clue about his general disposition.**

***“Eeyore stood beside the stream and looked at himself in the water. ‘Pathetic,’ he said. ‘That’s what it is---pathetic.’***

***He turned and slowly walked down the stream for twenty yards, splashed across it and walked slowly back on the other side. Then, he looked at himself in the water again.***

***‘As I thought,’ he said. ‘No better from this side. But nobody minds. Nobody cares. Pathetic. That’s what it is.’***

***There was a crackling noise in the bracket behind him and out came Winnie the Pooh. ‘Good morning, Eeyore.’, said Winnie the Pooh.***

***‘Good morning, Pooh Bear,’ said Eeyore glumly. ‘If it is a good morning,’ he said. ‘Which I doubt.’<sup>2</sup>***

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/eeyore>

Sometimes, I know that I am more like old Eeyore than I care to admit. And the church can be as pessimistic as he is.

We expect the worst. We count on failure. We are suspicious of anything that sounds remotely hopeful or optimistic. We are skeptical of anyone who suggests that anything we do can make a difference in the big scheme of things. Because you and I are so flawed and imperfect, we feel as if nothing we do is worthwhile. Because the church is so flawed and imperfect, we doubt that we can accomplish much of anything.

Methodist minister and former Dean of the Chapel at Duke University Will Willimon writes<sup>3</sup> about going to hear a well-known speaker deliver a lecture entitled *The Renewal of the Inner City Church*. A group of pastors sat and listened as the speaker told one true story after another about inner-city churches that had suffered years of declining membership and waning enthusiasm that had, by the grace and power of God, rediscovered their mission and become thriving communities of faith.

Willimon was inspired, but he was dismayed afterwards when the time came for questions and comments. One pastor after another criticized the lecture. The speaker was obviously looking at the church through rose-colored glasses, they said. One preacher even implied that the speaker had lied.

It sounded too good to be true. Too amazing. Too miraculous. Just telling fish tales, they thought.

Willimon felt bad about the group's reaction. In fact, he was horrified. So later in the evening, he apologized to the speaker and mentioned that he was surprised the lecture had met such opposition.

*"I wasn't,"* said the speaker. *"That's the reaction I always get from mainline church people. They are amazed when God wins. Scared to death that Easter just might be true after all."*

We are amazed because, like Eeyore, we look in the mirror and expect to be disappointed by what we see. We see only the warts and the flaws. We assume that the truth is that things are hopeless because we are just pathetic. And we doubt that things can or will ever be any better.

We forget that God tends to do some of God's best work in and through fallible, imperfect, unworthy, unqualified folks. Folks like us. Folks like Peter.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2004-01/get-out-here>

Perhaps, the most unbelievable aspect of this entire story is this brief conversation that Jesus and Simon have after they have hauled in that huge catch of fish. Simon had failed. Simon had fallen short. Simon had let Jesus down.

Simon was just like the prophet Isaiah who stood before the Lord and knew that he was a man with unclean lips.

Simon was just like Paul who knew that he was unfit to be called an apostle. The chief of sinners, he called himself.

Simon was just like us. Inconsistent. Inadequate. Unreliable. Pathetic. Just pathetic.

Yet God still called him and still calls us. God offered him and offers us a task. Our brokenness and sinfulness is no obstacle.

Peter cried out for Jesus to depart from him. But his sin could not keep Christ away. It could not prevent God from making good use of him.

One of my favorite stories concerns the famous inventor Thomas Edison. Edison was working on something that folks back in the 19th century considered a crazy contraption: the light bulb.

It took a team of men 24 straight hours of non-stop work to put a single light bulb together at the time. Apparently, when he was finished with the first one, he was eager to try it out.

It needed to be carried upstairs where it could be tested. So Edison handed that first light bulb to a young boy who worked in his lab. The boy was very nervous as he carried it up the steps. Cautiously, inch by inch, he eased along staring at his hands and not really looking where he was going.

And sure enough, just when he reached the top of the staircase, he dropped that first light bulb. And it smashed into countless shards of broken glass.

It took the entire team another 24 hours to construct another light bulb, an exact replica of the first one. They were exhausted, but also excited to see if their device would work as they had hoped.

So when Edison was ready to have this second light bulb carried upstairs to the testing area, he handed it to the same young boy who had dropped that first one<sup>4</sup>.

Friends, that demonstrated a grace that is not unlike the grace of our God. Even though we may have dropped the ball (or the light bulb), Jesus still places his mission in our hands. Our failures and flaws are no obstacle to the Holy Spirit. The fact that we are sinful and unworthy does not disqualify us from serving God. For it is precisely the sinful and unworthy whom God calls.

Even though we fall short time after time, there is no reason for us to be pessimistic. Even though we may get tired, even though we may grow weary, even though we may become broken, even though we may feel discouraged, the Holy Spirit can and does work through us.

There is no need for us to come up with any lie when we look in the mirror. For the truth is that that Christ has called us to be the church. Even though we are unfit and unqualified and un-everything else you can imagine.

The truth may sound like a fish tale. But still, we are invited to keep letting down our nets. God keeps putting the nets in our hands and encouraging us to keep working. Christ urges us to go out again and again into the deep waters of life.

But we never go alone. He always goes with us. And with Christ, all things are possible. An abundance of joy is possible. An abundance of life is possible. An abundance of love is possible.

This is not just a fish tale. This is not even just a true fish story. This is gospel.

May it be so for us this day and every day.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/f/forgiveness.htm>