

SERMON FOR FEBRUARY 10, 2019

TEXT: LUKE 5: 1-11

THEME: FOLLOWING JESUS

On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, ² and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.³ Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. ⁴ And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." ⁵ And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." ⁶ And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. ⁷ They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."⁹ For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, ¹⁰ and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." ¹¹ And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

In the name of Jesus:

When our children were little we used to read books to them before they went to bed. One of the books that we read was a book titled: "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day." It's one of my favorite children's books because it has a great deal to say about life. It's about a little boy for whom nothing goes right. The story opens with these words: I went to sleep with gum in my mouth and now there's gum in my hair and when I got out of bed this morning I tripped on the skateboard and by mistake I dropped my sweater in the sink while the water was running and I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. I think I'll move to Australia.

In the car pool Mrs. Gibson let Becky have a seat by the window. Audrey and Elliott got seats by the window, too. I said I was being smushed. I said, if I didn't get a seat by the window, I'm going to be carsick and throw up. No one ever answered. I

could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. And, that's just the way it turned out. That night the little fellow said, "It has been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. My mom says some days are like that. Even in Australia."

Yes, there are days that are like that, in Australia, and in America. There are days like that, for those who don't profess faith in Christ, and especially for those who follow Christ. What does it mean, exactly, to follow Jesus? What is involved in following Jesus? The Gospel lesson for today from the book of Luke gives us some answers.

If you listen to popular preaching today, following Christ means that you are living life on easy street. So many preachers today emphasize the blessings of God in life, as if that is all there is in following Christ. Their message is simple, follow Christ and you will be blessed by God. And that is true, to a point. To follow Christ is to be blessed by God, but many have put an American, secular twist to Christian discipleship today. Whether it is a television evangelist such as Joel Olsteen exhorting you to "live your best life now" or a preacher that promises a heaven here on earth when you follow Jesus, the message rings hollow because their message just doesn't jibe with reality of living life today.

Thomas Reeves in his book *The Empty Church* describes this scenario. "Christianity in modern America is, in large part, innocuous. It tends to be easy, upbeat, convenient, and compatible. It does not require self-sacrifice, discipline, humility, a zeal for souls. There is little guilt and no punishment. The faith has been overwhelmed by the culture. Christianity becomes a cultural Christianity when the

faith is dominated by a culture to the point that it loses much of its authenticity. What we now have might be labeled as a Consumer Christianity. Millions of Americans today feel free to buy as much of the Christian faith as seems desirable. The cost is low and customer satisfaction is guaranteed.”

I think that this is a reason why a great many Christians go church shopping, they go from church to church looking to have their needs met, looking for something that they didn't get in their last church. In the end, Christians are still looking for something more meaningful in their relationship with Jesus. They follow Jesus but become disillusioned when difficulties come or when things don't go their way, and the result is only heartache and despair when they try to follow Jesus.

Let's face it, if our following Jesus relied only on our own efforts, then our following Jesus winds up at a dead end and we are then failures in our following Jesus. Following Jesus has become for many a list of rules and regulations that one has to keep, a check list to check off. And so Christians today are chided that they don't give enough money, don't have enough faith, don't expect miracles, and don't do this or that, as if their Christian life and discipleship depends upon themselves. No wonder many are disillusioned, because they have followed their own ideas rather than following the One they should be following, namely, Jesus.

We should have learned this simple lesson long ago. Sinful human beings at many times fail God and are good at offering excuses to God. Moses said “I can't speak.” Jeremiah said, “I am only a youth.” Abraham said, “I am too old.” Mary said, “I am only a woman.” Each thought that their walk with God depended on the individual, on the sinner. God, though, teaches something different.

Look at our Bible passage today. Peter is out all night fishing. He has done everything he knows how to catch fish, and comes up empty. Jesus tells him to drop the net on the other side of the boat. Peter thinks, "I have been there, done that." But taking Christ at His word, Peter follows, and is blessed. The power in the blessing rests in Christ and His word, not in Peter.

And Peter's response is classic, "Lord, leave me, I am a sinful man!" I can't follow you; I am too much of a sinner! And Jesus' word to Peter is "Don't be afraid. I will make you a fisher of men!" Peter tried to bow out of following Christ by telling Jesus that he had already been fishing, he had already dropped his nets on that side of the boat, and he didn't get any results. Why should following Jesus be any different? Peter then said, "I am too sinful." But Jesus told him not to look to self, look instead to Jesus.

Don't be afraid. Look to Jesus and follow Him. That is Good News for us today. Are your sins burdening you? Do you think that your sins are too great to be forgiven? Don't be afraid, Jesus has forgiven you. He lived His life as your Substitute; He died His death in your place. The blood of Jesus cleanses you from all sins, past and present. Don't be afraid, you are forgiven. Are you fearful of the events of life? Do you wonder how in the world God will work out your future? Do you tremble at the possibilities of what may come? God's word to you today is the same. Don't be afraid, to you is born in the city of David a Savior, Christ the Lord. The eternal God became man, to be your help in time of need. If Jesus has taken care of your sins, and He has, won't He also provide for your future? His love is constant for you. Nothing will ever be able to separate you from His love. Are you fearful of death?

Your own death or the impending death of someone you know? Don't be afraid, the angel said at the tomb, why do you seek the living among the dead, Christ is risen, just as He said. Jesus says that He is the resurrection and the life. All who believe in Christ are assured of eternal life. Christ has tasted death and defeated death for all who believe in Jesus. Whoever believes in Jesus has eternal life, life with Christ now and the certainty of life forever with God.

Yes, you have eternal life now. You don't have your best life now, but you do have eternal life now, as a free gift of God in Jesus Christ. In Baptism God has given to you a new life in Christ. Your sins are forgiven. Christ lives in you and through you. But that doesn't mean that Jesus has promised to you a heaven here on earth. There are still trials and temptations. Each of us is burdened with our sinful flesh. Christians still suffer in the world, because God has called us out of the ways of the world to follow Christ. Even though we are sinners, we are different, called by God to live differently, that our lives reflect the love God has for us in Jesus. Jesus invites us to take up the cross and follow Him. Our crosses are heavy. They sometimes wear us down but we are never worn out. Our faith is tested but is not lost. We may feel alone but God doesn't forsake us. God has brought us to faith in Christ and keeps us in faith, through His Word and Sacrament, so that throughout our pilgrimage here on earth, our focus, our purpose here on earth is molded and shaped by Christ and His love for sinners.

Irwin Shaw wrote a short story called *The Eighty-Yard Run*. As a college freshman, at his first football practice, he broke loose for an 80-yard touchdown run. His teammates looked at him with awe. His coach said, "You're going to have quite a

future around here.” His girlfriend awarded him with a kiss after the practice. Irwin Shaw has the feeling that life is completely satisfying and rewarding.

But nothing in the rest of his life ever lives up to that day again. His football experience is equally disappointing. His marriage sours. The pain of failure is even greater because he remembers thinking on a perfect day many years before that life would always be that pleasant, satisfying and rewarding.

Life does not stand still. There isn't a once-for-all experience. And that is especially true for the Christian. It was Winston Churchill who said, “Success is never final. Failure is never fatal. It is courage that counts. You see, when you follow Christ, things won't work out always the way you want them to. There are going to be bad days. Sometimes when you follow Christ, you will fall on your face. You will fail. But failure doesn't mean the end. That is why Christ came, to forgive and renew. In the waters of your Baptism God has called you to be His own. In the waters of Baptism He has given you new life. In Word and Sacrament God forgives and strengthens your faith so that you can continue to strive to live for Christ. Jesus said in this world you will have trouble, but be of good cheer, Christ has overcome the world. Through the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ God has overcome the world for you. He gives you that victory, and now calls you to live by faith, walking in the way of Christ, following Him, trusting that everything will work out to your good for God has called you in Christ. To follow Christ means that you take your difficulties, your hardships, your failures, your inadequacies, and follow Jesus in the way He has for you to go. This is in part what it means to take up your cross and follow Christ. Following Christ is not easy, it is a rough road, but it is the

road God has paved for you with His own Son's blood. It is a road you are called to travel, relying not on yourself but on the grace of God in Christ.

Many years ago Oswald Chambers said to a group of students in a college chapel service: We have to learn to make room for God -- to give God "elbow room." We calculate and estimate, and say that this and that will happen, and we forget to make room for God to come as he chooses. Expect him to come, but do not expect him only in a certain way. At any moment he may break in. Always be in a state of expectancy, and leave room for God to come as he likes.

When Jesus got into the boat with three defeated fishermen, He didn't point them to their failures. He gave them another chance. And taking Christ at His word, they not only caught fish, but were made fishers of men. God's will was entirely different than what they had expected. Today Jesus invites you to let down your nets for a catch. It is difficult work, this thing called being a follower of Jesus and a fisher of men. We can never be good enough, but Christ is. So take Jesus at His word, follow Him throughout your life, use the opportunities God gives you to witness to others about Jesus, to share His love with others. And rest assured that He is with you, even unto the end of the world. Amen.