



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL  
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

# The Greater *Fortune*

## February 10, 2019

**Text: Luke 5: 1-11**

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, ‘Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.’ Simon answered, ‘Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.’ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!’ For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.’ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.



**Sermon:**

Simon and those sons of Zebedee—James and John—knew what they were doing—they were fishermen. This was no hobby; this was no passion; instead, it was a vocation and a career, and they were good at it. They knew what they were doing. They knew they needed to go out late at night while the fish were awake and restless; they knew where to go fishing—about a hundred feet off of shore, and they knew how to fish. In that time of day, the reason there were two boats is that they would have engaged in a choreography of sorts—a dance—a way of catching as many fish as possible. With two or more boats working in unison, they would unfurl what is called a trammel net—section woven onto section of netting until there were five hundred feet of net arranged in a circular or conical shape becomes a three-layered trap for the fish. The fishermen’s arms and backs would be tested as they lowered the massive weight of netting into waters in hopes of a great haul.

This was no passive way of fishing; this is not throwing out your line and simply waiting for something to bite. Once the net was in the water, the fishermen would go into a frenzy; they would beat the water, causing a great commotion at the edges of the nets that drove the fish further into the nets and deeper into the trap they had created. If getting those nets into the water was heavy work, then pulling them back out was even worse. Their bodies would have been aching—their minds exhausted.

Longer than the actual fishing itself, the rest of the night would have been spent untangling the net from fish and debris and all other matter of things that had gotten trapped there. They would not have been alone on the shore at that time; tax collectors would have been hanging over their shoulders to watch and count, for a catch of fish was worth a great deal—well worth the effort and the choreography. This particular night started out no different from any others; the men knew when they were to set out to catch the fish; they knew exactly where to go and as in countless nights before—they knew exactly how to fish and how to cause that commotion.

Yet, throughout that long night, nothing stirred at all. Nothing went deeper into those nets; it was a waste of time. There was no commotion in their nets; instead, as they turned back to the shore, they saw a commotion on the beach. But there were no tax collectors waiting on that day; instead, Luke tells us that the crowd teemed and twirled on the shore like great schools of fish, seemingly mocking those exhausted fishermen returning empty-handed. It was probably annoying that the fishermen then had to go and find a quiet spot away from all those people, where they could do the work of untangling those nets and spending the rest of the night carefully scrubbing that five hundred feet of netting. For those nets were the tools of their trade—the lifeline of their work.

In the midst of the abundance of all those people they would have been painfully aware of the emptiness with which they had returned from that long night of fishing with nothing to show for it. Then most likely irritated and exhausted, they looked up and saw that he had come by. Simon, the one called Peter and James and John knew about this guy; for you see, he had been making quite a commotion in these parts of late—that itinerant teacher—the one who healed everyone who came to him—that wandering man whose words rang with authority. He was the one whose presence always caused a commotion—whether in synagogue or by seaside—always bringing people out searching deeper and deeper for the greater truth.

In Luke's Gospel, they knew who Jesus was. Distinct from Matthew, Mark and John, in Luke's account they were well aware of who Jesus was even before they met him. They knew about his work, his calling, and his vocation, because to live in that area at that time meant that you would know, without question. So after an empty night, once the nets were finally stored back upon the boat, you can imagine how these men felt when Jesus came up and asked them to be ferried out in the water. "You got to be kidding me—" is the churchy way of saying what I'm sure Simon said to Jesus.

Yet Simon and his team provided Jesus with a floating pulpit, with nary an objection, and there bobbing up and down just off the shore—one hundred feet out where the fish should have been—Simon got a front row seat to hear what all the commotion had been about. He heard about Jesus' teachings about life and possibility; he got a taste of what drew those

crowds to this preacher and teacher. And after Jesus finished preaching and teaching (because there are very few examples in the Bible of where Jesus didn't talk for a long time), Jesus tells him, "Okay, Simon, we're not going back in; we're going out further. Go out into deeper water; go out right now and cast your nets, even though it's the time of day when you would be a fool to try and catch some fish. Go out and let your nets down for a catch."

Simon's mind told him that this was folly, and his muscles screamed at him that they were tired and wanted to go home, yet from all of his learning, he imagined this would be another dead-end, followed by another round of all that untangling and cleaning of the nets. Yet, there was something about Jesus, for Simon did the illogical, despite what people on the shore may have thought. He put his nets down and then the boat began sinking low in the water with such a huge catch that the fishermen cried out for their partners on shore to come out and help them. They came rushing out to find so much abundance that their boat nearly went under water too.

You've got to imagine that now these fishermen's minds are spinning—their minds are calculating and overwhelmed, for they know exactly how much fish are worth, and they're seeing all of these fish writing in their boats, Simon's mind was bursting, for not only did the tax collectors know how much the fish were worth—he did too. I wonder if he started about having a new boat—you know—one that didn't leak so much, or maybe he thought about hiring a whole bunch of people who could take on that work of lowering the nets in and causing all that commotion, so he could just sit back and relax. Perhaps, he just imagined having a few days off to rest those tired, aching muscles. For surely this moment was the catch of a lifetime. Surely, this haul, these fish were the most amazing thing he had ever seen. For a fisherman, it just didn't get any better than this.

Maybe it had been his front row seat or maybe this impossible catch that shifted his attention, but Simon, the one who would become Peter—knew that as great as this moment was, as lucrative as it would be and as life-changing, it paled in comparison to what this itinerant teacher, this roving preacher had to offer him. Then he falls down at Jesus' feet and tells Jesus, "Go away from me, for I am sinful." And yet neither of those things are what they sound like. Jesus didn't hear them that way either, for the Holy One did not try to change his mind; he simply said, "Do not be afraid." You can do this; this job is yours. You see, what Simon knew and why he fell on his knees was not how sinful he was but how amazing Jesus was.

Have you ever been in worship and just for that moment—whether you heard the choir singing or received a morsel of bread, or heard a prayer offered up—you felt the sacred and the holy entering your heart. So you know the feeling that Simon had—that even preaching and healing was only the tip of the iceberg for what Jesus truly offered; Simon's whole world was about to change and with it the rest of the world too. There sitting on a shiny fortune in his boat, Simon, who would later become knew deep down where the greater fortune truly was. And despite the fact that he knew absolutely nothing about this job Jesus was giving him when he said, "C'mon Simon, you're going to catch people!" Simon's response might have been, "Yeah, well, okay, right..." Despite the fact that he knew nothing about any of that, he knew enough that he had to follow.

I think that what is so important about Luke's account is that, unlike the other disciple's accounts which somehow seem far-reaching for me, that in the middle of everyday life that this person you had never seen and had never heard of before could come up to you and change everything. Here in this account, it puts us there; here was the man they had heard so much about. Here is the man that we talk so much about. These men had heard about Jesus; this was no instant conversion. Rather, like us, it is a conversation that comes time after time. Leaning in, leaning in, until we too are ready to do what Peter did—look absolutely foolish—to go out in the world in the sight of all people and to do the impossible—to extend love, to offer grace, and to simply uplift people, knowing the impossible is not only possible—it is our calling. There was a fortune of fish there. There was more money than Peter had ever seen in his lifetime laying on the beach. And Jesus said leave it all there, for that only leads to greater traps in the future. That only ties you to ever more pursuits that are illusory—whether a bigger catch of fish that leads to bigger boats or bigger wealth—leave it all. Leave it all behind and come and follow me. “It is no passive thing,” Jesus said to Simon Peter. “I’m going to ask you to go out into the world and make a commotion—to stir things up and bring people in, until this catch pales in comparison.”

One caveat before I finish. I know you care about the earth; I know you care about creation but I don't think that Peter was creating an ecological disaster by leaving rotting fish on the shoreline. Here's what I imagine. I imagine that as Jesus walked away, and as he got ready to follow, Simon Peter drew the courage to turn around and face that crowd that was teeming on the shoreline—those people who had come out searching for hope and meaning, and here's what I imagine that he said, “Friends, this is the feast of God. It is for the people of God, and that is you. Come for all is ready. Come and eat of this.” And even though he had no idea what he was doing, Peter turned and followed Jesus every day that he drew breath and even all the way to his own cross. That is what we are called to do. No matter what we know, no matter what we think we know—to let the truth of Jesus' teachings soak into our hearts and minds that we might drop everything to follow—to drop what we know and what we're good at, simply to go out there and be love. And in doing so, we will catch more fish than you can ever imagine, and the world will be a better place.

Amen.



*The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor*