

February 10, 2019

TEXT: [Luke 5:1–11](#)

TITLE: Lord, Come To Me, Go Away From Me

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Is the church still relevant today? Lots of people are quick to argue that it is not. They point to the overall decline in membership, the clergy abuse scandals, the superficial mega-churches, and uncreative mainline congregations. They poke us in the chest and insist that no one is seriously looking to the church to deal with the big problems facing our world today—militarism, climate change, injustice and inequality—before they turn their backs and walk away.

Is the church still relevant today? It's a big question for me, as later this month I will celebrate 30 years of service as an ordained Presbyterian minister. Most of my life has been dedicated to this institution—to God and God's people in a variety of locations. I think it has been relevant. I think the church is still relevant. And when I read this passage from Luke, I catch a glimpse of what Christ is saying to you and to me about how to make sure the church stays relevant.

After using Peter's boat as a floating pulpit, Jesus turned to him and said, "Go out to deep water and let down your nets for a catch." That's it! 21st century church, you need to go out to deep waters. Move away from the shallows—out from the safe waters close to shore—out from superficial spirituality that is inches deep when our world is hurting deep down in its very bones. O church, move out to deep waters—to talk about politics and "blackface" and racism, Parkland anniversaries and gun control, misogyny and #metoo and the fact that more women than men are running for President next year. Can we go to the deep waters and take about how to forgive, how to offer grace when people mess up, how to move beyond past sins and scars? Honestly I don't know how we'll navigate these topics—or whether the church can talk faithfully while swimming in these deep waters. But I don't see how the church can be relevant unless it tries, unless it follows Jesus—unless it goes where the Lord sends it, casting our nets in the deep waters where Christ's outstretched hand tells us to be.

But here's the problem. If we go to deep waters—if we become the church God intends us to be, we must tackle something that was embodied for us by Simon Peter long ago. As much as we want to follow Jesus and be close to Jesus, I'm not so sure we are ready for a true close encounter with Jesus. We are like Peter in the boat, looking up at this Messiah who somehow caused more fish than he'd ever imagined to fill his nets to overflowing. And like Peter, our response is "go away from me, Lord, for I'm sinful and unworthy and not ready for all this." We cry "Lord, come to me" until that prayer is answered and we then find ourselves saying, "Lord, go away!" St. Augustine, in his Confessions, famously prayed a version of this when he said, "Lord, make me chaste and pure, but not just yet."

There are several versions of this "come to me, go away from me" syndrome in the bible. There is Adam and Eve, happily communing with God in the Garden of Eden until

they disobey by eating the forbidden fruit and are next seen hiding in the bushes trying to avoid God altogether. There is the New Testament story of the woman with a debilitating flow of blood, who longs to see Jesus without being seen by Jesus. So she sneaks up behind him, touches the hem of his robe as he moves through a crowd, until he stops, knowing what she has done, and much to her horror, lovingly calls her out before the whole crowd. There's also the passage we heard earlier from Isaiah 6, in which the prophet is caught up in a vision of the Lord on a throne with heavenly angels singing of God's holiness until the scene widens to include Isaiah and he cries out, "Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips, unworthy of the Lord of hosts." Come to me; go away from me.

We are routinely filled with opposing, mixed feelings—knowing what we ought to do yet captive to the very things that prevent us from doing them. We read about the importance of proper diet and daily exercise, but we so love our comfy sofas and the television remote. We want to make the world a better place, a cleaner and healthier place, but can I really be bothered to wash out my plastic containers so they can be recycled or bring a reusable straw with me to Burger King? There's an odd historical illustration of this "come to me, go away from me" principle in something I recently read about the history of lotteries in America. What's not to like about a lottery? You spend a little bit of money for the chance to win a big jackpot. Lotteries have a long history, including in the 1700s when all 13 original colonies had a lottery to raise money to pay their bills. It was an egalitarian way to serve the common good, except when it became too egalitarian. In 1799, an African American slave named Denmark Vesey used the \$600 from his lottery win to buy his own freedom. He went on to found the African Methodist Church in Charleston and later led an uprising against slaveholders in 1822. Lotteries potentially challenged the racist and biased systems of society at large, so for this and other reasons by 1860, all state lotteries were outlawed until New Hampshire brought one back in 1964.

Come to me; go away from me. We've said it—Simon Peter said it. Yet consider how Jesus responded to him and thus to us. First, when Christ comes to us, it is always in the midst of our mundane lives. Jesus sat next to Peter in Peter's fishing boat. That's the equivalent of Jesus being next to us as we're driving our car, typing in our work cubicle, standing in line at the grocery store, or yes, sitting in a pew at church. There are no limits to where Christ can be except when we wrongly convince ourselves that Christ has nothing to do with some part of our life. By trusting that Jesus is near to us wherever we are—work, home, doctor's offices, on city buses—we re-discover what it means to have a vibrant and relevant faith.

Second, Jesus sent Peter out to deep waters, so we need to be prepared to go there as well. There's a big difference between splashing in a kiddie pool and swimming in the ocean—feeling the surge of the waves, being aware of the sheer power contained in those waters. There's a deep joy that only arises from overcoming hard challenges—happiness over finding a quarter on the sidewalk is not the same as what we feel after hiking the Grand Canyon. We were not meant to lead lives of quiet desperation. Life is designed to be beautiful and complex and challenging, and the only way to experience

all that is to move forward into that complexity, toward that beauty, intentionally paddling out into life's deep waters.

Third, Peter dropped his nets and received a bounty that overwhelmed him. It literally dropped him to his knees. But once he got back to shore, Peter walked away from the miraculous haul of fish. The point of Jesus' presence—of Jesus' guidance and power—was not to enrich Peter. The point was to save Peter, to call him to his true role as a disciple of the gospel for a hurting world. The same power that sent Peter to his knees is what lifted him up to become the rock of the church of Jesus Christ for the world. That same power calls to each of us.

And lastly, the one who persistently calls us by name and whom we may try to push away is not deterred by our hesitancy. Invariably Christ's first words to us are always the same: *Do not be afraid*. He said it to Peter there in the boat. He said it to him later when they were walking on the waves together and Peter began to sink. After Easter, Jesus embodied that sentiment when he looked Peter in the eyes three times after he'd denied even knowing Jesus and asked him, "Peter, do you love me?" We may not feel ready—Lord, the time's not right for this. We may not believe we are worthy—Lord, I'm not right for what you have in mind. But remember: The one who drives us to our knees always lifts us back to our feet and is with us for whatever lies ahead—even to the end of the age.

The apostle Paul knew this—Paul who literally persecuted Christ and his church; Paul, who like Simon Peter also fell to the ground and wanted Jesus to go away from him. This same Paul would later write (in Ephesians 3:20) about how the power of Christ is at work within us and is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or hope or imagine. For Peter, that looked like nets overflowing with fish. What would that look like in your life?

Think of that question as you consider what I asked earlier: Is the church still relevant? Yes, if we follow the One who is right beside. Yes, if we go where he sends us, even if it leads to deep waters. Especially if it leads to deep waters. Yes, if we cast our nets even when we're tired and aren't sure our efforts will be worth the effort, but somehow we manage to trust where Christ is pointing. Yes, if we silence our fears and self-doubts long enough to hear Jesus' words "Don't be afraid." Yes, if we're willing to see ourselves as Christ sees us, as forgiven, as loved, as companions sent out to offer hope and healing to others.

Yes, the church is still relevant. There is no other Lord I choose to follow into the future than the One who is already beside me. Our faith affirms this good news: In life and in death, we belong to God. There's nothing more relevant than that.

AMEN