

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
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The Church at Sea

Luke 5:1-11

In 1986, two Israeli fishermen found a boat buried in the mud on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. The mud had protected the vessel from oxygen and hungry microorganisms. But the wood was completely waterlogged, like wet cardboard. After a long and complicated excavation, and submersion in a chemical bath for seven years, the boat was put on display at a museum. One marine archaeologist described it this way:

It's the ugliest boat I have seen. It was made out of 12 different types of wood, most of it recycled. No two planks are the same. You have to give the builder a lot of credit because he made the whole thing out of junk. It floated for a long time. The repairs show between 30 and 60 years of use.¹

Those three to six decades of use probably occurred during the first century. Though there's no evidence connecting the boat to Jesus and his disciples, it was more than likely the kind of boat they would have used, which has made it historically significant, as well as popular among museum visitors. It became the inspiration for a book, a DVD, and even a replica at what was once the Holy Land Experience theme park in Orlando, Florida. The vessel is known simply as the Jesus Boat.

In today's text from Luke, we're introduced to the Simon Boat. It belongs to a fisherman by that name. Simon is there by the lake, washing his nets, when Jesus decides to use his boat as a floating pulpit. The crowds craving the word of God have gotten so large that Jesus needs to create some space between himself and his listeners. So he puts out a little from shore, sits in Simon's boat, and teaches them.

Boats are a big deal in the Bible. Noah in his ark, surviving the flood. Baby Moses in his floating basket, sheltering from Pharaoh. Jonah in a ship bound for Tarshish, fleeing from the Lord. At numerous key points in the story of God's relationship with his people and with the world, boats are essential players in the advancement of God's redeeming purposes. That includes the story of Jesus. Boats played a large role in his life and ministry, and are mentioned at least 50 times in the Gospels.

If you're using *The Upper Room* devotional guide provided here at our church, you may have already noticed that the cover for the January-February issue depicts the scene of Jesus calling the first disciples. In this case, it's a portrayal of Matthew's version of Jesus summoning Simon and Andrew to follow him. Matthew's narration of Jesus' call is slightly different from what we encounter in Luke. But one of the elements that remains constant is the boat. The boats that Simon and Andrew used to navigate the Sea of Galilee were an expression of who they had been and who they were now. And in today's text from Luke, they're also a sign of who these disciples will be. "From now on you will fish for people," says Jesus (v. 10).

Immediately after that, Luke says, "So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him" (v. 11). Now that probably doesn't mean that they left fishing completely

behind. More than likely, being on a boat, out on the water, remained a significant part of both their lives and their livelihood. But now they had been gathered up by the master fisher and brought aboard a vessel populated by messengers of God's arriving kingdom.

In some parts of the Christian faith, the central part of a sanctuary is called the *nave*, a term derived from the Latin word for "ship" or "boat." The church, as a community of Jesus' followers, came to be viewed as a vessel of salvation, symbolized by the image of a boat. The early church didn't have anything fancy in mind. Just a humble boat with a mast and a sail. What matters most isn't the impressiveness of the boat's size or design, but the presence of Christ in the vessel with his disciples.

I like the way that one pastor describes it as he reflects on a cruise that he took with his family. He would regularly refer to the vessel as a boat, and his father would always correct him. "It's not a boat," he would say patiently. "It's a ship." Out of that experience, the pastor began to think a lot about the differences between a ship and a boat. Among the differences, he says, is this:

. . . it doesn't take much courage to sign up for a cruise. Typically, the gravest potential dangers are gaining 10 pounds from the buffet or twisting an ankle on the dance floor.

In ancient days, however, the sea was terrifying. It was believed to be the one part of creation that had not been tamed by God. In an age when everyone believed in sea monsters and an earth so flat that you could sail right off the edge, it took guts to set sail in a creaky wooden boat. Ancient sailors had to trust in God and in each other.²

When Jesus calls us to follow him, he's not inviting us to sign up for a cruise. He summoning us to climb into a vulnerable vessel that's guaranteed to face headwinds and get tossed around by unexpected threats. Sometimes the boat gets rocked. And sometimes the boat needs to be rocked.

One man tells the following story about a fishing trip:

My friend Mike and I went out for an afternoon on the lake, a chance to talk a little and baptize some new fishing lures. We spent several hours fishing, with no luck, when we decided to head back before it got dark. After about half an hour, I heard the outboard motor sputter, then die. Mike went to check out the problem and determined that we were almost out of gas. There was a little, but it was too low to reach the fuel line. He came up with an idea. If I would stand in the middle of the boat, with one foot against both sides and rock back and forth, we might be able to get enough gas to slosh in the line to get the motor started. Once started, Mike figured if I kept rocking and he ran the engine slowly, we could get back to the ramp. Sure enough, after 15 minutes of my rocking the boat and Mike working the throttle, we returned safe and sound.

That event taught me a valuable lesson: Sometimes you have to rock the boat if you want to make any progress.³

Committing your life to Christ and stepping into this boat called the church can be a ticket to disruption, not a guarantee of calm waters and perfect peace. As the great preacher D. L. Moody once said, "I thought when I became a Christian I had nothing to do but just to lay my oars in the bottom of the boat and float along. But I soon found that I would have to go against the current."⁴

We're not here because we want a life of ease. We're here because of the call of Christ. And once the call of Christ gathers you into this boat, it doesn't take long to realize that life in the community of disciples isn't always smooth sailing. Our congregation, like every

other fellowship of Jesus' followers, encounters storms, rough waters, and headwinds. Life in this boat called the church can get frightening and discouraging. We sometimes find ourselves in deep and uncertain waters, such as a pandemic, where questions start to arise. How can we stay on course during a time like this? How do we keep from sinking? What are the spiritual supplies we need to weather this kind of storm? Among the passengers in this boat, who needs to be doing what? Who's keeping an eye out for some light on the horizon?

Maybe a more uncertain time like this, when we feel like we're further away from the safety of the shore, can be a good opportunity for us to reflect on what it means for us as a congregation not just to stay afloat but to make progress in the mission of God's kingdom. For instance, what are the places in our church's ministry where we need to assess the condition of our sailing vessel and strengthen its structure and condition? Author Anne Lamott once noted,

A friend said mournfully the other day that he'd lived his life like the Professor on "Gilligan's Island." While he found time to fashion generators out of palm fronds, vaccines out of algae, he never got around to fixing that huge hole in the boat so he could go home. How many people actually do?⁵

As we examine this boat called Grace Baptist Church, are there holes we need to be repairing so that we can reach our destination in Christ? What areas of our life and mission need maintenance or restoration so that we can do more of what Christ has called us to do?

Within our fellowship of deacons, and soon among our Church Council, we'll be talking more about where we as a church need to be focusing our God-given energy and resources during the year ahead. For instance, what are some options for how our congregation can reengage or reconnect with our community, especially in view of the closing of our day care ministry? How can we take the ways we've employed technology during the pandemic, and build on them, in order to reach more people and create other avenues for participation in our kingdom work?

Joyce Wright tells about a time when she and her husband Norm were fishing in a mountain lake. They hadn't caught a thing. She says, "Norm had rowed the boat to five or six different spots, looking for the fish to bite. Finally, after about three hours, he got this big grin on his face and said, "Now we can really start fishing. We know where the fish aren't!"⁶

Though Joyce shared that story as an example of Norm's positive outlook and enthusiasm for life, there's also wisdom in there for us as we discern the Lord's direction for our church's ministry. We need to know where the fish aren't, and where they are. We need to know where and when and how God wants us to be fishing for people for the sake of the kingdom. We need to be praying, asking God to show us how we should navigate in our current context. Lord, when it comes to this boat called Grace Baptist Church, what direction should we go, and which destinations should we head toward?

As we go further into this year, may God move us away from the safe shore of maintenance and further out onto the deep waters of mission, so that we can continue to cast our nets for the sake of the gospel.

¹ David Neff, "Miracle Boat." ChristianityToday.com. April 22, 2010. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/april/29.42.html> (January 12, 2022).

² Mark Ralls, "It's Not a Ship; It's a Boat." faithandleadership.com. March 11, 2014. <http://www.faithandleadership.com/content/mark-ralls-it%E2%80%99s-not-ship-it%E2%80%99s-boat> (January 12, 2022).

³ Derrick Lewis. preachingtoday.com. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2005/may/15899.html> (January 13, 2022).

⁴ D. L. Moody, *Christian History*, No. 25.

⁵ Ann Lamott, "Sincere Meditations." Theooze.com.

⁶ Joyce Wright, in *Marriage Partnership* (Vol. 7, No. 3).