

My mother taught me to knit over Christmas break my freshman year of college, and although I sometimes will neglect it for awhile, I have been honing that skill for this last quarter century. In seminary I discovered that I could knit simple things that didn't require a very fancy pattern while I listened to a lecture or presentation, and I could still focus—maybe even focus better—on the material. We didn't do this in regular classes, but at the spring and fall convocations, you could find a whole row of us up in the balcony furiously stitching away. A couple years ago I was sitting in one of our synod continue education events at the end of a presentation, finishing a few stitches to get to a stopping point in whatever I was working on. As he was making his way out of the room, one of my colleagues paused to watch me, and then said something along the lines of, "Sometime I'll have to show you the better way to do that." Don't you just love unsolicited advice on how someone else could do what you do better? I wonder if that's how the disciples felt when Jesus told them, at the end of their long and completely unproductive night of fishing, where to throw their nets for a catch.

We don't know too much about the disciples' background beyond some of their occupations—like these fishermen—and some of their hometowns and families. Artists have often portrayed them as older men, with grey beards and not a lot of remaining hair, but that may be because the artists or their patrons were older men. We don't hear about any of the disciples being married yet; we know that a few of them still have living parents; and most of them outlived Jesus for at least several years as they helped build the early church. It's just as likely that they were only as old as, or even younger than Jesus, who Luke says was about 30 when he began his public ministry. Still, this would have given Simon, James, and John decades of experience working on their family fishing boats, when along comes Jesus, son of a carpenter, who isn't old enough to be a wise and respected elder in any field, telling them how to do their job.

Simon responds rather graciously, all things considered. They had fished all night and had caught nothing. They had come back and had already washed out their nets. Simon had rowed his boat back out so that Jesus could use it all day as a floating pulpit. It has to be with both skepticism and exhaustion that Simon agrees—*I don't think this will work, but if you say so, I'll try*. And of course they catch so many fish that the nets start to break, they fill both boats, and the boats start to sink. Simon recognizes that something supernatural is going on, enough so that he urges Jesus get away from him because he is, by his own admission,

unworthy. But Jesus tells him what people in the Bible are always told in these situations: *Do not be afraid*. From now on, he's going to be doing a whole different kind of fishing. So Simon, James, and John walk away from everything, including the largest catch of their lives, in order to follow Jesus.

Now, if I were a televangelist preaching the prosperity gospel, I might try to tell you that the moral of this story is to obey Jesus so that you can reap extravagant blessings through your business success. But that misses the major development of this story. Jesus tells them where to go for this fantastic catch not for the purpose of helping them build a more lucrative fishing business, but to inspire them to shift to a whole different life's work. He doesn't make them more successful fishermen; he turns them into fishers of people—which is an entirely different calling. This encounter with Jesus changes their life purpose.

If you hear this story and feel called to walk away from your job to become an itinerant faith healer, I do hope you'll stop into my office to discuss that decision before you give your boss your two weeks notice. I say this as a second-career pastor, as someone who left one profession for another, that's not the universal message of this story. Jesus uses this miraculous catch of fish to get the disciples' attention, and once they can more clearly see who and what he is, Jesus invites them to follow him in his work on behalf of others. Peter, James, John, and nine other disciples left their livelihoods in order to do that; of course, the overwhelming majority of Jesus' followers throughout the ages have followed Jesus' call to loving service from within their families, communities and the jobs they already had.

When the disciples leave “everything” to follow Jesus, they aren't just leaving boats and nets and fish and family. They are leaving one mindset—see how many fish we can catch—for another purpose—see how we can bring hope, healing, and, as it turns out, also loaves and fish, to people who are in need. The greatest miracle in this story was not Jesus filling their nets with so many fish but Jesus filling their hearts with so much compassion that they walked away from their single greatest success, because from then on, they would define “success” quite differently. May our hearts be similarly filled with compassion so that, in whatever we do, we too may follow Jesus' way of love and service.