

Who Do You Say That I Am? Jesus: Compelling Leader

By Rev. Jenny M. McDevitt

This is one of the few stories that shows up in all four Gospels. Each one tells it a bit differently, including or emphasizing different details, but all four of them include it for a number of very good reasons.

The past few weeks we have considered who Jesus was as a teacher and as a prophet. Today, we consider who he is as a leader.

A few years ago now, back at my previous congregation, I was attending one of our New Member Lunches. We had a large crowd that day, so space was at a premium. Because I was the staff member with the shortest legs, and because I know where all the fun happens, I sat down at the kid's table. The adults were talking about this story. As they talked, I grabbed some paper and crayons and started drawing the scene. The kids began copying my drawing, adding in their own personality and perspective. One of them focused mainly on the fish, including all manner of sea creatures I am certain have not yet been found or identified by any official source. Another one of the boys, Louis, included a very elaborate pirate ship. I asked him to tell me about it.

He said, "Jesus is saying, 'Follow me, mateys!'"

I asked him if he thought Jesus was a pirate.

He laughed at me, while giving me a look, a look that said, "Good grief, you poor adults; you really don't understand much, do you?"

"No, he wasn't a pirate," Louse said. "But if he wanted the pirates to follow him, he had to talk to them like a pirate, right?"

Now, in Luke's version, and only in Luke's version, Jesus never actually says Follow me. He simply says, "Do not be afraid—from now on, you'll be catching people." The "follow me" part is assumed from that, though Luke makes sure we get the point.

"When they had brought their boats to share," he says, "they left everything and followed him."

What's also unique about Luke's gospel is how much happens before Jesus calls his disciples. In the other three gospels, his ministry has just begun. In Luke, Jesus has been tempted by the devil, returned home and nearly been chased off a cliff, healed a man with an unclean spirit, and healed Simon Peter's mother of a fever.

Then, he's near the Sea of Galilee and crowds are pressing in on him. He sees two empty boats, with fishermen cleaning their nets. He asks Peter to take him a ways out, so he can teach from the boat, and after he finishes teaching, he instructs Peter to let down the nets. The nets Peter just finished cleaning. After a futile night of catching absolutely nothing. But, maybe, because Jesus had healed his mother, or maybe because of something Jesus had said while he was teaching; or, maybe just because an awful lot of people were watching, whatever the case, Peter goes out into the deeper water, as Jesus says, and drops the nets, which are soon flooded with fish.

Peter's response is an interesting one. He doesn't express shock or say thank you. He doesn't say, "Hey, how about you meet us back here tomorrow night?" He says, "Get away from me, for I am a sinful man." But, without missing a beat, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid; from now on, you will catch people." Luke fills in the rest.

When we hear any version of this story, I think our first inclination is to wonder—Could I do it? Would I go? Could I leave the kids while they are still in school? Would I follow this relative stranger and leave my sick father at home? Would I really walk out in the middle of gymnastics practice or the debate tournament? Could I make that sort of decision with dinner still simmering on the stove?

I don't want to belittle these questions. They are real. But, when we make this moment all about us, and what we might do or might not do, we aren't paying enough attention to the astonishing power of God and what he is already doing. In fact, Barbara Brown Taylor, who is a preacher and a teacher of preachers, warns against exactly that. Do not lose sight of God's capacity, she says, "to recruit people who have made terrible choices, to invade the most hapless lives and fill them with light, or to sneak up on people who are thinking about lunch, not God, and smack them upside the head with glory." [\[1\]](#)

See, this is not a story about the power of human beings. Peter makes that abundantly clear. Peter catches absolutely nothing, essentially tells Jesus he's wasting his time, and then tells Jesus to get away from him.

This is not a story about the power of human beings to make good or faithful choices. This is a story about the power of God. Because God, working through Jesus Christ, creates fish where there were no fish before. And God, working through Jesus Christ, creates disciples where there were no disciples before.

So often, when we think about what it means to be a disciple we think it's about believing a particular way: affirming the bodily resurrection or the virgin birth or the glowing transfiguration. Or, we think discipleship is about feeling a particular way: having hearts that are strangely warmed when we turn in pledge cards or waking up each morning overwhelmed with joy because we just can't wait to start praying. Or, we think discipleship is about acting in a particular way: serving meals at the Open Table or volunteering with children's worship or spending the night at the overnight shelter.

And yes: discipleship is about all those things. But, before it is about any of those things, discipleship is about recognizing that God wants you, that God loves you, that God would and has moved heaven and earth just for you...just the way you are right now. This moment.

Rowan Williams, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, says, "Jesus is where we belong, the one to whom we belong. To know ourselves as those who belong to Jesus before we belong to anyone or anything else is the beginning of a right understanding of discipleship." [2]

But, look again at the story—Peter isn't so sure. Remember how Luke tells this story so much later than the other gospels? This means Peter and the others know more about Jesus—more about who he is and what he can do. The other gospels tell it as if Jesus is more of a curious stranger. Luke tells it in a way that resonates more with modern-day readers, with us—because like Peter, we know more of the story, which means we know more about how we do not measure up.

"Go away from me," he says, "for I am a sinful man!" I wonder if today we might say it something like this: Go away from me, because I am not worthy. Put distance between us, because I am not enough. Don't stand too close to me, because I can't possibly be the sort of person you want to be associated with. Get away from me, because you need someone more skilled. More talented. More faithful. More patient. More of everything I am not. Go away from me; I am too much of a mess.

If I understand the text, the best part of the story is when Jesus ignores him completely. The gospel good news of this story is that Jesus has utter disregard for everything Peter says to him. This is what makes Jesus the single most compelling leader this world has ever known.

He never says, come and follow me after you've gotten your act together. Come be my disciple when you've sorted out what you believe. He never says, there's a place for you after you've made partner, or after you've gotten into a certain school, or brought in a certain amount of revenue, or when you are finally free of sin. He never says, follow me when you can afford it or follow me if you can make it to the edge of the water faster than anyone else. He just says, "Do not be afraid; from now on, you will be catching people."

When speaking to fishermen, he uses the language of fishermen. He doesn't ask Peter or any of the others to be something they aren't. He embraces who and what they already are. And, in case you need to hear it this clearly: Jesus embraces who and what you already are.

Jesus embraces who and what you already are. Even if you happen to believe you are an inadequate parent, or that you haven't lived up to your potential. Even if you show up every week secretly wondering if any of this is true or if you show up every week just looking for enough strength to make it through the next few days. Even if you've lost your job, lost your confidence, or even if you've lost your mind. No matter what, you are loved, and no matter what you or anyone else believes, Jesus believes you are extraordinary and beloved.

Let me put it another way: “The miraculous catch was not the haddock and shad and whatever else Peter and the rest of them caught that day, but the fact that Peter and the rest were caught up, even as we are, in the net of Christ’s love.”^[3]

Or another way: It was for you that Jesus Christ came into the world: for you he lived and showed God’s love; for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary and cried at the last, ‘It is accomplished’; for you he triumphed over death and rose in newness of life; for you he ascended to reign at God’s right hand. All this, he did just for you^[4].

Hafiz, a Persian poet from the 12th Century, wrote:

Admit something: Everyone you see, you say to them,

“Love me.”

Of course you do not do this out loud,

otherwise someone would call the cops.

Still, though, think about this,

this great pull in us to connect.

Why not become the one who lives with a full moon in each eye

that is always saying

with that sweet moon language

what every other eye in this world is dying to hear?

To make sure pirates understood him, Jesus needed to talk like a pirate. At least according to my friend Louis. To make sure fishermen understood him, Jesus needed to talk like a fisherman. At least according to Luke.

And so, it is Jesus himself who lives with not only a full moon in his eyes—but the moon and sun and all the stars as well—and he is saying in whatever language you need, what you are dying to hear: I love you. I love you. You are enough. You are more than enough. You are always and ever enough.

^[1] Barbara Brown Taylor, from her sermon “Miracle on the Beach,” published in *Home By Another Way*.

^[2] Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief*, Chapter 1.

^[3] William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*.

[4] Paraphrased from the baptismal liturgy included in the Church of Scotland's Book of Common Order.