

Genesis 28:10-18a
Luke 5:1-11

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THIS CLOSE

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." *Genesis 28:16-17*

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. *Luke 5:8-9*

We've all been there: the seemingly fruitless days—the seventh sales call that yielded nothing more substantial than a brisk handshake, the fourth physician in a row, and still no closer to an answer; scrambling through the trash at Burger King for your child's retainer, her third this year; the unresolved billing dispute and hours on the phone with an accounting system as complex as the Federal government; the check you just wrote for car repairs for \$1300, then the engine stalls again on the way home. And you feel like Sisyphus of old, rolling that huge boulder up a precipitous hill. On such days God can seem as remote as Saturn in a midday sky.

The fishermen in our story feel the same way. No one knows the lake better than these seasoned fishermen. (Luke calls it Gennesaret, we know it best as the Sea of Galilee). They have known it since boyhood and read it like a book. They've weathered its volatile squalls, and been as suddenly becalmed, with a long row home and a heavy haul of carp, tilapia and catfish still writhing on the smelly planks.

This day, tired to the bone after a night of fruitless fishing, they likely just want to crawl into bed after cleaning and stowing their nets. But Jesus has gathered a crowd on the lakeside beside them. They aren't his disciples yet. But they know of him, perhaps they've heard him teach before in Capernaum after their night's fishing. He is already a celebrity in the region. But whatever thoughts of slipping away to bed they might have are dashed like a relative's sudden arrival. Jesus is getting backed up to the water's edge by the crowd, and seeing Peter's boat hauled up on the shore, he climbs in and asks Peter to push off a little way from shore. then he preaches the Kingdom of God to the crowd. When he's done, and Peter's imagining his waiting bed, Jesus does the unthinkable—he asks him to get back into the boat, put out into deep water, and let down the nets they've just meticulously

cleaned and neatly stowed. Peter protests, as diplomatically as he can. “Rabbi, we’ve been out all night and caught nothing.” You can feel his weary and conflicted soul. But something eases the disposition of his soul. He knows Peter by name. He teaches with an authority and clarity that credentials him as someone who speaks with captivating insight—a *rabboni*, a master teacher. “Yet if *you* say so, I will let down the nets.” When they do as asked, the results are so extravagant in contrast to their nighttime labors, it borders on the terrifying. Which is Peter’s response. He suddenly realizes that he is in the presence of the holy. God is this close, and he begs for distance, for like all of us he knows himself to be too much contaminated by the world to abide so close to this presence. Yet here God is, in Jesus, *this* close!

Luke’s telling of this story of the miraculous catch of fish reveals for the diligent reader why these twenty-four chapters were accorded the heady tradition of “gospel.” They are *theology* (i.e. “words/instruction about God”) at its pinnacle—insights on God beautifully woven into the narrative of daily events. First, the story is clearly Luke’s version of the call of the disciples. Instead of Mark and Matthew’s familiar “follow me,” Peter and Andrew are mending their nets when Jesus becomes part of their very ordinary existence in a boat, on the sea, there transforming their already spent day with an extravagant catch of fish. Then he hits them with his challenge, telling them that they will soon be “catching people.”

Second, so far they have done nothing to warrant or merit Jesus’ confidence beyond trusting Jesus in their weariness and setting back out to sea. It’s a bit like picking ministers from a common lottery of passers-by. All Peter has done is trust Jesus—but at this point that’s all Jesus wants. They have no meritorious credentials, no theological degree, no experience in the mission field, no finely honed vocabulary of liturgical practice, no tested knowledge of the Scriptures, no lengthy theological training, examination, credentialing, ordination, installation. There is no church—they will form it. They are ordinariness personified—fishermen. And that is the point. All this is about as far from the historic tradition of the church as you can imagine.

We, by contrast have reversed Jesus’ founding model, even elevating for centuries now what theologians call “the clerical paradigm.” This is our formal investing of training, ministerial functions and knowledge base in a professional clergy who are largely responsible for preaching, teaching, baptizing, marrying, burying, administering, counseling, praying and so forth. Yet the call to everyman and woman has not abated, it’s just been—well, if the truth be told, hijacked by our tradition of giving it to the clergy! Yet, you too are *this close* to the holy. You too are equally called to be

catchers of people, apostles of Jesus. So the last word is from Jesus. He will order their lives from now on. That, too, has not changed.

Do you recall the fleeing Jacob's words in that wilderness place in the middle of the night, as he arose from a restless sleep. "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." God, he discovered, was that close—not in that place exclusively, but in every place universally. God in Christ is the one we take with us, the one who inhabits us, unshakably *this* close—our conscience, counselor, rest and wisdom—*everywhere!*

Will you join me about this table of the Lord, with this personal story from Steven Vryhof of the exploding immanence, the unshakeable nearness of God.

One Sunday morning, years ago, I entered a Lutheran church in a small village on the coast of Sweden. Perhaps because of the early hour, or the lure of a beautiful summer morning, or the effects of state-run Lutheranism, there were only fourteen congregants gathered. The minister was a slender, blonde lad who had to be fresh out of seminary. I struggled with the Swedish hymns and the Lutheran tendency to stand to pray and sit to sing, the opposite of what I was used to. I joined the others at the front railing for communion, taking the bread and the wine, then returning to my seat.

While the minister, his back to us, was putting away the elements, a parishioner, a middle-aged woman, returned to the front, this time pushing an old woman, presumably her mother, in a wheelchair. The mother had the classic nursing-home look: slumped to the right, thin, scraggly, colorless hair, vacant eyes, and a slack-jaw with her tongue showing a bit. She was here for communion. There was an awkward minute as we all waited for the minister to notice the two waiting at the railing. He finally did turn, perceived the situation, and proceeded to retrieve the elements. He carefully administered the bite of bread and the sip of wine to the old woman. And then he paused, and I held my breath, because I knew what was going to happen next. The young minister looked at the old woman, physically a wreck of a human being, and he said to her the most important words that one human being can say to another human being. The minister looked her right straight in the eye and said to her, "Var Herre Jesus Krist, vem kroop och blod ni hartatt emot, bevaran din sjal til levigh liv." Our Lord Jesus Christ, whose body and blood you have received, preserve your soul unto everlasting life.

And I suppose it was a coincidence, but it was a God-given coincidence nonetheless. At that precise moment, the bells of the church started pealing, ringing and resonating and resounding and reverberating through the church and through me, making the hair on the back of my head stand up. Heaven touched earth and it seemed that Var Herre Jesus Krist, himself was saying, "Yes! I will

do that!” And then the Father and the Spirit joined the Son, and using the same words given to Julian of Norwich, the Triune God proclaimed loudly over the ringing of the bells, “I *may* make all things well, and I *can* make all things well, and I *shall* make all things well; and I *will* make all things well, and you will see yourself that every kind of thing will be well!”

Steven Vryhof, “Crash Helmets and Church Bells” *Perspectives*

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