

Leaving Behind
Luke 5:1–11
Sunday, February 9, 2025

Let us pray: Lord, you have the words of eternal life. Speak but a word to us, so that we may have life in your name. Amen.

Twelve years ago, when we were getting ready to move here from Nebraska, we had to get rid of a lot of stuff. In part to cut down on moving expenses, but also because our house *out there* was a lot different than the house we would be living in *here*, and a lot of the things that we had just wouldn't fit in the new house. So we started downsizing. We got rid of couches and tables and chairs and televisions and appliances and lawn equipment. I remember one night we were eating dinner, and the doorbell rang. Jen said, "Oh, that must be the lady who's buying our table." I said, "Which table?" Turns out it was the table that we were eating dinner on! She came in, we lifted up our plates, and she took the table right out from under us. Then we had to *stand up* with our plates, because she was taking the chairs, too. We had to leave it all behind out there, because there was not a place for it in the new life we were about to start here.

I'm sure a lot of you have gone through that before, either downsizing for yourselves or helping your parents or someone else prepare to move. It's hard, because there are things that have been a part of our lives for so long, and they have such special meaning to us that we don't want to get rid of them. But there's not *room* for all of it in this new place we're going, so we have to make choices. What do we take with us, and what do we leave behind?

It's like that hypothetical question: if your house was on fire, and you could only grab one thing, what would it be? Wedding pictures? The firebox with important documents in it? Clothes? If you try to take

it all, it's going to hinder your ability to get out of the house safely. So you have to make that really hard choice of what to take with you and what to leave behind.

For the past year or so, I have been fascinated by pictures of refugees fleeing their homes in Gaza and Ukraine. I find myself zooming in on the pictures to look at the things they are taking with them. Photo albums. Blankets. Children with a favorite toy or stuffed animal. Backpacks crammed with whatever they could fit inside of them. One woman carrying this massive painting that someone in her family had made. Some people trying to take way too much, and it becomes so cumbersome and hard for them to carry, that they have to start dropping things along the side of the road. It's like they are leaving one life, on their way to this new life, and they have to decide what to take with them and what to leave behind.

A friend of mine from seminary is the pastor of Pacific Palisades Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles. About a month ago, he was in a meeting when someone came in and said that the flames from the wildfire were coming down the hill right in their direction. They evacuated everyone from the church building, and then he had a choice to make: does he go back into his office to grab whatever he can, or does he take off on foot to go to get his two kids from school? Of course, he chose to go get his kids. He left everything behind in his office, which burned down with the rest of the church building not long after. He said, "My wife met me from her work in the parking lot, and we all got in her car and got out of there, so I didn't have a chance to go home to get anything. I didn't have a chance to get anything out of my office. If I just took another minute, what would I have done differently?" Sometimes you have to leave *everything* – your whole life – behind, because even stopping for a minute could keep you from living at all.

It makes me wonder what that moment was like for Peter and James and John, when Jesus said, "Follow me," and they left everything behind to start living a new life with him. They left their families, their

friends, their homes, their possessions, their boats and nets and jobs. Right before this story, we hear about Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law. Did Peter leave his wife behind? His children? Did they hesitate? Did they think, "If I could just go grab *this* real quick..."

There is a story a little later in Luke's gospel, where Jesus calls a man to follow him, and the man says, "I will, but first let me go bury my father," to which Jesus said, "Let the dead bury their own dead." And then another man says, "I will follow you, but first let me go say goodbye to my family," to which Jesus says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God," in effect saying, "Follow me, and don't look back." Right after *that*, Jesus sends his disciples out in pairs to go proclaim his message in the surrounding towns, and he tells them, "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals. Don't bring any money or extra clothes or even a staff with you." He is calling them to leave everything behind and trust that God will provide for them.

As I was reading this story over and over again this week, that one line kept jumping out at me: *They left everything and followed him.* And the question that kept coming to me again and again was, "What do *you* need to leave behind to follow Jesus Christ?" You might not be called to leave *everything* behind – your family and friends and home and possessions. Some people *are* – monks, nuns, missionaries – but not everyone. What do *you* need to leave behind in order to follow Jesus?

When Jesus told Peter to put the boat out into the deep water and let down his nets for a catch, Peter says, "We have worked all night long but have caught nothing." Based on his experience, Peter was certain that this wouldn't work. He had to let go of his certainty in order to follow Jesus. How do *you* need to leave behind your certainty to follow Jesus?

When he says, “Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets,” he had to leave behind his own *will* and his own insistence on how things *should* be. Because love, as Paul says, does not insist on its own way, and if we are going to love and follow Jesus, we cannot insist on our own way. *We* have to say, “If you say so....” How do *you* need to leave behind your own will and insistence on your own way, on how things *should* be, in order to follow Jesus?

When they let down their nets, it says that they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they had to call their partners to come out in the other boat to help them. Peter couldn't just rely on his own abilities and efforts. He had to rely on *others* and let them help him. So many times we try to make life work on our own. We don't want to burden or bother anyone with our problems. We want to be independent and not have to rely on anyone else. But Christ calls us into community, to be part of a larger body, to help one another, to love and care for one another, to bear one another's burdens. How do you need to leave behind your independence and a reliance on your own efforts and abilities in order to follow Jesus?

When Peter sees the massive haul of fish that they have caught, it says that he falls down at Jesus' knees and says, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” Peter *humbles* himself. He says, “I am not worthy of being in your presence, Lord.” He lets go of his pride and recognizes his sinfulness and lets go of this perfect image of himself. How do *you* need to humble yourself and leave your pride and ego and self-image behind in order to follow Jesus?

Jesus' response to Peter is, “Do not be afraid.” What *fear* do you need to leave behind to follow Jesus?

Jesus says to them, “You're not going to be catching *fish* anymore, you're going to be catching *people*,” and they leave their jobs behind to follow him. Those of you who still work, maybe your *job* is keeping

you from following Jesus. Maybe you're focusing so much time and energy *there* that it's negatively impacting *other* parts of your life. Or maybe there's a coworker or some other aspect of it that is just really difficult or negative and is keeping you from being Christlike there. Maybe it's time to move on and find something new. Or maybe you don't need to leave the whole job behind, just some aspect of it. What, in your work, do you need to leave behind in order to follow Jesus?

There is an interesting aspect of this story that we *don't* see, because it is *behind* the text. Sally Brown (who is teaching our Wednesday night class), talks about how, in Jesus' time, fishing was controlled by Rome. The fish in the Sea of Galilee belonged to Caesar, so you had to purchase a license and pay taxes on any profits that you made. This left most fishermen poor at best and near starvation if fish were scarce. But Jesus sets them free from that political control. How are politics controlling *you* and keeping you from following Jesus? Maybe it's making you anxious and angry and afraid, and it's time to turn off the news for a bit. Maybe it's keeping you from loving your neighbor, viewing them as an enemy instead. Maybe you are relying on and trusting in *that* so much that it's keeping you from relying on and trusting in God. How do you need to leave politics behind in order to follow Jesus?

Maybe the political situation around us is making you feel powerless, and you need to write letters and make phone calls or volunteer or do *something* to put your faith into action. Try turning off the news and reading scripture to see what Jesus might be saying to you in the midst of all this. How can Jesus set you free from the power that politics holds over you?

What anger do you need to leave behind in order to follow Jesus?

What pain do you need to leave behind in order to follow Jesus?

What grudges do you need to leave behind? Who do you need to *forgive* or seek forgiveness *from* in order to follow Jesus?

What addiction do you need to leave behind? And when we talk about addictions, we're not just talking about drugs or alcohol. Maybe that *is* what's keeping you from following Jesus. But there are so many *other* addictions, too. Addictions to money, food, sex, shopping, gambling, the internet, our phones. We can have addictions to power and control. An addiction is anything that we *depend on* and feel that we cannot live or function properly without. Anything we feel like we *need* in order to feel happy or whole or in control of things. What addiction do you need to leave behind in order to follow Jesus?

Is there a mindset that you need to leave behind to follow Jesus? A prejudice? Is there something in the past that you need to let go of and leave behind in order to follow Jesus? Guilt over something you did? Anger or pain over something that was done to you? Is there an unhealthy relationship that you need to leave behind in order to follow Jesus?

There can be any number of things that consume our lives and control our behavior and keep us from being the people that we want to be; any number of things that keep us from trusting God, serving God, loving God and our neighbor. What do you need to leave behind?

Whatever it is, the *good news* is that you *can*. Yes, it may be hard or scary or painful, but if you are carrying all of this stuff with you, it's going to weigh you down and hinder your ability to move forward and live this new life that Christ is making possible for you. Jesus wants to set you free from it. He is saying, "Do not be afraid. I am here. I am with you. And I have something *so much better* in store for you." And whatever it is that you are holding onto, it is never too late to let it go and leave it behind. Trust Jesus, he will give you what you need to do that. Just say to him, "Lord, help me let go of this.

Help me leave it behind, because I want to follow you and live a new life with you.” You may need to keep praying that every five minutes, but eventually Jesus will take it away from you, and it will lose its power over you.

Life is so much more than *stuff*. Life is so much more than *politics*. Life is so much more than anger and pain and fear. Life is so much more than this thing that you did years ago or this thing that someone else did to you. Life is beauty and peace and joy and love and forgiveness and freedom and generosity and kindness. Jesus is calling us to live the fullness of that life with him. What do you need to let go of and leave behind in order to do that?