



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

3rd Sunday after Epiphany: January 21, 2018

Sermon Title: “Leaving Your Nets and Falling in Love”

Sermon Text: Mark 1:14-20

Two sets of brothers made dramatic decisions in today’s Gospel. Simon and his brother Andrew left their fishing nets to follow Jesus. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, did the same thing, leaving behind their father and what appears to have been a profitable fishing business.

There was a time in my life when I would have read this story and thought, “Wow, such brave and faithful men, leaving their careers and their families! What saints they were!” And maybe that’s all true of these brothers. But I think it’s also true that the disciples – and Peter is a prime example – *gradually* grew into the calling. They were “works in progress” whose faults and failures are preserved in the New Testament for all to see. And so when these sets of brothers left their nets, maybe it *was* a beautiful act of faith. But maybe they were motivated by other things.

After all, we can all think of people who have walked away from careers, homes, and families, for less explicitly spiritual reasons than following the Son of God. For example, think of the thousands of students and faculty who come to the Penn State campus every year from across this country and around the world, leaving the familiarity of family, friends, careers, and hometowns behind, so that they can teach, study, learn, and grow here in this community. Haven’t they likewise left their nets?

Consider as well an example from history. During the American Civil War, hundreds of thousands of men and women, both North and South, left the comforts of home, family, and career to fight, spy, nurse, or work in factories to support the war effort. Some sacrificed *everything* merely in support of an *idea*, like preserving the union, gaining independence, freeing the slaves, or preserving the institution of slavery. Some left small towns simply because they were bored and were hungry for adventure. Still others saw the war as an opportunity for advancement, a chance to get rich, or make a name. And then there were those who left the comforts of home to live in filthy camps and march headlong into volleys of shot and shell because it was more terrifying to be known in their hometowns as cowards than to face bullets and bayonets.

Yes, there are many reasons why people leave their nets. Some of them are noble and praiseworthy. Others aren’t.

One of the biggest challenges of contemporary society is that we are all snared in *so many* nets. Nowadays there are more things trying to attract our time, attention, and money than

ever before. Even Sunday morning has become hotly contested ground as church competes with youth sports; leisurely mornings of sleeping in, brunch, and the Sunday paper; weekend getaways to vacation spots; and hundreds of channels of cable television and on-demand entertainment. None of these things are objectively bad. In fact, they sound pretty wonderful. But I know in my own life that if I cling too tightly to those other nets, then I don't have a hand to cling to Jesus. That's a risk which all of us face and must honestly admit.

And so *my* challenge is to persuade you to leave your nets to follow Jesus. I don't mean that you have to move away, change careers, or go to seminary. I'm talking about attending church regularly, giving generously, and getting involved in the life and ministry of our congregation. This is a daunting challenge, because I cannot offer you the same kinds of rewards that usually induce and motivate people to leave their nets.

Quite candidly, leaving your nets to follow Jesus won't guarantee that you'll become wealthy, respected, or popular. In fact, the very opposite may occur. And leaving your nets to follow Jesus won't guarantee high adventure or nonstop entertainment. In fact, the very opposite may occur. Filling you with guilt and fear might motivate you to follow Jesus for a little while, but not for long, because that's not how Jesus works. And so as I invite you to leave your nets and follow Jesus, I cannot offer you the shiny rewards of the world in return. All I can offer you is Jesus himself. Is that enough? Well, I think it *is*, if you fall in love with Jesus.

Love is such a powerful force. My wife and I met in college choir as freshmen. But there weren't any sparks until we reconnected a few years later, as juniors. Our first real date was a trip to the shopping mall so that Linda could buy a pair of jeans. You have *no idea* how much I *hate* shopping for jeans. I hate shopping for jeans for *myself*, and I loathe standing around waiting for *someone else* to try on twenty pairs of jeans. But that's what I willingly and joyfully did, just so I could spend time with her. It's amazing what you'll do when you're in love.

Of course, that whole jeans episode pales in comparison to the many sacrifices my dear wife has made in 29 years of marriage: two careers, long hours, getting dragged to sporting events and battlefields, and having to share a home with a guy who has more books than most libraries. She's a saint! It's amazing what you'll do when you're in love.

And so friends, I want you to fall in love with Jesus, because it's amazing what you'll do when you're in love. It might even cause you to leave a few of those nets that constantly clamor for your attention. *But how do you fall in love with Jesus?* For that matter, how do you fall in love with *anyone*? It's a bit of a mystery, isn't it? There's some sort of almost magical attraction that defies explanation - call it chemistry or a spark that turns into a fire. When it comes to falling in love with Jesus, that spark is the work of the Holy Spirit, who stirs something deep within you. It's a longing you feel, and a sense that there's an emptiness in your life that cannot be filled by anything else. The Spirit's stirrings eventually draw you to a place like *this*, where that love can be nurtured and grow stronger.

Falling in love is more than just chemistry though. It also involves an investment of time, as you learn more about one another. And as you feel the love of the other person for *you*, you

can't help but love that person back. Before you know it, that person has become a huge part of your world, and suddenly you're willing to sacrifice nearly *anything* in order to love and support that person. I think we all know what that feels like. Maybe you've felt those emotions for a spouse, your children, a parent, or a family member. It's my prayer that you can feel that way about *Jesus*. And just to be clear, I'm not talking about loving the *idea* of Jesus, or admiring him from afar. I want you to fall head over heels in love with Jesus. Because it's amazing what you'll do when you're in love.

If you fall in love with Jesus, regular church attendance isn't a boring burden; it's a joyful opportunity to be in his presence. If you fall in love with Jesus, giving to the church isn't a draining duty; it's a wonderful way to show your affection for your beloved by blessing the very people and causes that mean so much to him. And if you fall in love with Jesus, taking an active role in the ministries of this congregation isn't another exhausting obligation on your schedule; it's a liberating moment to finally and fully be the person God created you to be.

Love can be an unpredictable thing. Sometimes it strikes at first sight, and sometimes it takes a while to bloom. Wherever you might be in that journey, I assure you, something *is* stirring in your heart right now. Your beloved is calling to you. Those nets you thought were so important are beginning to lose their luster. So let them go. Don't hold back. Fall in love with Jesus. It's amazing what you'll do when you're in love. Amen.