

The Gathering of Disciples

This article on Luke 5:1-11 is taken in part from the IVP New Testament Commentaries

Luke 5:1-11 details how Jesus confirms the call of four disciples to serve with him. In this passage, miracle, teaching and discipleship form a collage that explains mission and who is qualified for it. Jesus performs a nature miracle, but the saying in verse 10 turns the entire miracle into a picture of mission. Here event and symbol merge. The event signifies not only what disciples are called to do but who disciples are as they do it. Simon Peter and Jesus represent different sides of the theology that undergirds the community Jesus is forging. Simon, for his part, knows that he is a sinner who is not worthy to experience the benefits of God's power and presence. There is no presumption that God owes him anything. Jesus, exemplifying God's grace, makes it clear that such a humble approach to God is exactly what God will use. Jesus calls these fishermen to fish for people rather than for finned water-dwellers (Matthew 4:18-22, Mark 1:16-20). Luke presents these two truths quite dramatically and vividly. Much in this event is ironic. When Jesus tells Simon to put the boat out and cast down his nets, it is a carpenter's son and teacher telling a fisherman how to fish. It is a little like a pastor telling a CEO how to run technical aspects of his business! Not only that, but Simon's response makes it clear that conditions for fishing are not right, since a major effort the night before had totally failed. Yet despite appearances and against his professional judgment, he follows the teacher's command to let down the nets. Simon Peter is responsive to God's messenger and thus an example of faith.

The result is success and near disaster at the same time. The nets are filled to overflowing, and so is the boat! The fisherman is desperate for help to bring in all the fish. The boat is so full it begins to sink. Jesus has guided Simon to a great catch, but that catch is a picture of how he will guide the disciples in other, more spiritual affairs.

Simon Peter realizes he has been brought into more than a successful commercial venture. As nice as it would be to have Jesus as a permanent fishing guide, God's messenger is in their midst, and the fisherman knows enough about God's holiness to know he is at risk. So Simon falls to his knees and confesses his unworthiness, asking Jesus to depart. He understands that sin produces distance between himself and God. Surely God wants nothing to do with a simple, sinful fisherman. It is best that Jesus go. In fact, Jesus is addressed as "Lord," but not because Peter understands that Jesus is God. It will take events in the next few chapters to lead Simon to confess Jesus as Christ (Luke 8:22-26; 9:18-20). Rather, Jesus is Lord here because he is God's agent. Nonetheless, Jesus should go, for Simon Peter is not worthy of the agent's presence.