
Just a bit to the left.
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
February 6, 2022
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 5:1-11

[image: cat listening to radio]

Does anyone here like listening to preachers on the radio? When I was wrapping up my ministry in Mimico and preparing for a new ministry in Rexdale, I decided I should listen to “Christian Radio” in the car when I could. I’m not sure exactly why I did it. But something about the language that was used by their search committee during my interviews suggested to me that my new congregation took a more classic/traditional outlook on the Bible and faith. so I figured I’d better learn some new language before I showed up. And I figured that radio preachers might be helpful.

Whether that was a sensible idea or not, I did learn a few things in the process. I learned that radio preachers preach long sermons. Actually, in truth I think they preach short sermons multiple times without sitting down in between. They believe in the technique of repetition to drive their points home. Radio preachers generally try to engage with people’s emotions. But at a very vague level. Which is only fair because they don’t know who is listening to them. But what I learned most of all is that all the sermons ended with the same punch line. I mean, sure, there were variations of that. But the exciting, dramatic, conclusion to every single sermon was some version of “give your life to Jesus”. Or, “give your heart to Jesus”. Or “put your faith in Jesus”. And the more sermons I heard, the more I started to dislike that ending.

To be clear, it’s not that I disagree with those statements. I agree fully that we should give our hearts to Jesus. That's not my problem. My problem is that “give your heart to Jesus” is a metaphor. And I think that preachers should help us all figure out what we actually need to do in more concrete terms. I don’t think that ending a reflection with a metaphor is helpful enough. That’s why I have preached on a variety of concrete topics here. Including the need to stop recycling for the sake of the environment. The need to stop eating animals. The need to fight racism. The need to consider deeply our human

attraction to war. And other topics you might have thought had no place in church. But for me, it is all an effort to put real flesh on the metaphor “give our hearts to Jesus”. It’s an attempt to talk about making actual, possible, doable life changes to help be and bring the kingdom of God to Brantford. Here. Now. It’s about everybody finding their own healing. Here. Now.

Some weeks, given the biblical texts and what is happening on our streets, that task can be pretty easy. But many times, it is not. And it really does not help that we have all heard these biblical stories so many times. Because we are perhaps used to hearing these stories and letting them roll off our backs thinking that the stories cannot possibly apply to us. Take our reading from Luke today - Jesus calls fishers to follow him. The obvious take-home message is stay away from beaches, and Jesus will not annoy you by asking you for anything. Well, that’s a literal reading of the text anyway. But if the message is just, “stay away from beaches”, we may as well have just watched the movie *Jaws*. Surely in the church we can do better than that!

[image: fishing with nets]

The story of Jesus calling the fishers is a well-known and well-loved story. But in the Bible, there are actually 2 versions of the story. We just read the version from Luke, which I think is the far better story. And I want to tell you why I think that.

In both Mark and Matthew, ... well, let me read you the entire story from Mark 1. “As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake - for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed Jesus.” (Mark 1:16-18). That’s the entire story. And the story in Matthew is basically the same. Moreover, in Mark and Mathew this story comes very early in the gospels. In both Mark and Matthew, Jesus is baptized, retreats into the wilderness to be tempted for 40 days. And as soon as Jesus emerges from the wilderness he calls the fishers as his first disciples. Jesus calls fishers and they follow. Instantly. Without question. Without hesitation.

In both Matthew and Mark it sounds as if Jesus was a completely unknown person who wanders down a beach, tells some fishers to leave their boats and follow him, and

they do it. The fishers don't appear to deliberate. They do not ask Jesus who he is or what his credentials are. They do not ask what the pay is like. They do not ask if they will get lunch breaks. They do not even ask Jesus how long he wants them for? Does Jesus want them for an hour? Or the rest of the day? Or a year? Who knows? They just follow.

This has led to countless sermons where the preacher said that this story is about following Jesus blindly on faith. The call to follow Jesus seems like a leap of faith, not something that we can be rational about.

But I have a problem with that interpretation. OK - 2 problems. Well, I guess it's actually 3 problems. One problem is that if we are called to blind faith does that just mean we should act on any whim that strikes us, imagining that the whim is from God? I mean, even if we accept the challenge of "blind faith", how exactly do we know which of our whims come from God? I get a lot of whims and I'm sure that you do too. How do we decide which ones to act on? A second problem is that when we hear the message about being called to blind faith, most of us tune out. Because we really don't know how to do that. As a metaphor it's fine, but we struggle to imagine any real action based on the idea of blind faith. That way of reading the story actually lets us off the hook, because we can decide that the message cannot possibly apply to us. A third problem is that there is no reason to be irrational here anyway. We just need to read Luke's version of the story and it will make a lot more sense.

And that's why I think the version in Luke is a much better story. Luke's version does not require a leap of faith. And because of that - spoiler alert - we are not let off the hook either! Luke's version of the story just might apply to us after all. You've been warned.

Of course, as with any good story, the story starts before the story starts. As I said, in Mark and Matthew, Jesus calls the fishers immediately after his time in the wilderness. In Luke, after his wilderness experience Jesus does not call the fishers - not right away. In Luke, after his wilderness experience Jesus travels around the country teaching in different synagogues. Then Jesus heals a man with an unclean spirit. Then Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law. Then Jesus continues to preach throughout Judea. His preaching is provocative enough that he even gets run out of town sometimes, as he read in our

story last week. So we know Jesus was doing something meaningful. Then - after all that - Jesus calls the fishers, as we just read a moment ago.

So in Luke's story, by the time Jesus gets around to calling the fishers, Jesus is already a known public figure who had already been teaching and healing. More than that. The fishers were actually already Jesus's friends.

So here's a more rational way to hear this story. Step 1: Jesus came to John the baptizer and was baptized. Over time Jesus became a well-known and trusted member of John's group. When John was arrested, Jesus took over the leadership of the group. And then, over time, Jesus took the group in a new direction. So, Jesus calling the fishers was simply a way of announcing that Jesus was now in charge of the group. This group of friends who Jesus had already been working with.

Why do we care about this? Is anything going to come out of this that makes that long preamble worthwhile? I have no idea. But I'll tell you why I care about this.

I care about this because it completely changes the metaphor of the story. The story of "calling the fishers" is not a call to abandon rational thought and embrace blind faith. Jesus was not calling unknown fishers into an unknown project. Jesus was calling the fishers (who were already his friends) to continue the ministry that they were already doing together. Yes, over time to take it in new direction. But to build on an existing ministry. Jesus called his friends to continue, to adapt and to grow. Not to start from scratch.

Jesus was calling his friends to make incremental changes to their collective ministry because John was no longer around. And Jesus starts by making an incremental change to their method of fishing. Jesus tells the fishers - who already knew what they were doing - to go out into deeper waters in order to find fish. The fishers - because they already trust Jesus - do so. And they find more fish than they can handle.

In this congregation, we are a lot like that too. Most of us have known each other for a long time. There are many friendships in this congregation. There are lots of good people in this congregation. And we have been doing ministry together for a long time. Granted, some of you might still think of me as "the new guy" to some extent because covid has limited our ability to get to know each other well. But this community has been

engaged in ministry for a long time.

And we too are being called into deeper waters. As one example, many of our long-standing outreach activities are not working right now. Perhaps some of us have given up hope. But perhaps we are called to move to deeper waters and to keep fishing. To find / create / or partner with new people and new activities that can serve both Brantford and our congregation. We are not being called to start from scratch. We are simply called to continue our work together in deeper waters.

[image: just a bit to the left]

The title of this reflection is “Just a bit to the left. What did you think I was going to be talking about? What were you thinking about?”

[image: drill bit for left holes]

Were you thinking about a drill bit that would let you drill a hole to the left?

[image: arithmetic bit shift]

Were you thinking about a computer algorithm for modifying the bit patterns in an integer?

[image: high way road wiggles]

Well, I hope you were thinking more along these lines. We are on a journey. And we continue to move forward. We just need to do a little wiggle. We just need to go a bit to the left. We need incremental changes in our ministries in order to make them work better. True, there may be some completely new projects we want to try that require big changes. But I believe that most of the changes that we need to make are incremental, small, doable, possible. We just need to go a bit to the left.

Whatever the metaphor “give your heart to Jesus” means here in Brantford it is not a call to do something completely new and off the wall. We do not need to look for insane new ideas that we do not want to do. We need to be open to incremental changes that lead to new opportunities in this congregation and in our own lives. Opportunities that are only just a bit beyond our grasp today. We do not need blind faith. We don’t need blindness at all. In fact we need to open our eyes and hearts to the current needs of our community.

What excites you about SHUC, and Brantford right now? But don’t tell me now.

This sermon will finish on March 6, at our Annual General Meeting. Come to the meeting prepared to share what we are called to do - and who we are called to be - in 2022. But you don't have to think really big. You might want to think just a little bit to the left.

Amen.