

The Gifts of Relationships: Encouragement

Luke 5:1-11 (NRSVUE)

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-gifts-of-relationships-encouragement/

I.

There's a powerful scene in the TV political drama *The West Wing* where Leo McGarry, the White House Chief of Staff, comforts his deputy, Josh Lyman. Josh is struggling with PTSD after being shot at the end of the first season of the show. While Josh appears to be doing well, his boss and secretary notice he's been struggling. They arrange for him to see his therapist, and afterward, Leo has a conversation with Josh. It's one of my favorite conversations in the show.

Against the backdrop of Christmas lights and music, Leo tells Josh a parable:

A man is walking down the street when he falls into a hole. The walls are so steep that he can't climb out. A doctor passes by, and the man shouts, 'Hey, Doc, can you help me out?' The doctor writes a prescription, tosses it down the hole, and moves on. Then a priest comes along, and the man shouts, 'Father, I'm down in this hole, can you help me out?' The priest writes a prayer, throws it down the hole, and moves on. A friend walks by next. 'Hey, Joe, it's me, can you help me out?' The friend jumps into the hole. The man exclaims, 'Are you crazy? Now we're both stuck here!' The friend replies, 'Yeah, but I've been down here before, and I know the way out.'

Then Leo looks at Josh and says, "As long as I have a job, you have one. Do you understand?"

Yes, prayer is essential. Medicine and therapy can be lifesaving. But sometimes, what we need is someone who meets us where we are — someone who jumps into the hole with us and says, I know the way out.

I think of a young man who stayed at the cold-weather shelter in our gym last year. He'd just been released from prison in the winter with nothing but the clothes he had on when arrested when it was warm outside. Someone told him about the shelter. He stayed there for about a month before getting a bed with the Salvation Army. He found a good job and an apartment. Just this past month, he has been volunteering at the shelter and, along with a couple of friends, provided breakfast one morning for the patrons.

This man has been in the hole, and the shelter and others helped him find a way out. Now, he's jumped back in to show others there is a way out.

II.

To encourage means to put in courage. Encouragement isn't shouting advice from the edge of someone's pain. It's stepping into the deep places with them, their struggles and uncertainties,

to help them find their way forward. It's getting in the boat, jumping into the hole, going into the deep—so that someone else might be inspired to be brave.

In Luke 5, Simon and his fellow fishermen had been working hard all night but catching nothing. They are exhausted, frustrated, and discouraged. Nothing to show for their work. Nothing to provide for their families. Nothing to pay the oppressive taxes owed to Rome. One wonders if this was an unusual day or another day in a long, disappointing season. Either way, they haul in their boats and wash their empty nets. If not for those dirty, tangled, empty nets, they would already be home in their sweatpants, zoning out to Netflix, eating their feelings.

Then Jesus shows up.

Instead of walking on water (which He does three chapters later), Jesus needs a boat. Conveniently, there are a couple right there. He steps into Simon's—the very man who will become Peter the Rock, a martyr for Jesus, a namesake for thousands of churches. But today, he's just Simon, the discouraged fisherman who wants to go home, far from the failures of the deep waters.

Jesus steps into his boat—into Simon's situation—without even being invited. Before calling him to cast into the deep, before the miracle of the overflowing nets, Jesus is simply with Simon. That's what true encouragement looks like. It starts with showing up.

Then Jesus asks Simon to put out a little from the shore. And after teaching the gathered crowd, Jesus turns to him and says: *"Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."* (v.4).

Simon hesitates. *"Master, we have worked all night and caught nothing."* (v. 5)

You can hear the exhaustion in his voice. The day is over. The depths gave him nothing He just wants to leave this watery disappointment behind.

III.

This week, I found myself appreciating Peter's honesty. We often focus on the miraculous catch at the end of the story. But what about this moment? The exhaustion, the discouragement, the feeling of pouring yourself into something—your work, your relationships, your calling—only to see little or no return?

I couldn't stop thinking about Peter's response to Jesus. Maybe it's because I, too, feel exhausted right now. Maybe you feel that way, too.

Maybe the state of our world is overwhelming you. Perhaps you've been pouring yourself into something - a job, a relationship, a calling—only to see little return. Maybe you've been waiting, praying, hoping, only to see closed doors.

As a church, we've been searching for additional pastoral staff for almost two years. It's a tough season—high demand, low supply. Recently, we had a promising candidate. After months of conversation, I got the call: God has led them elsewhere. And you can't argue with that.

But after that call, I just wanted to clean my nets, go home, and binge-watch *The West Wing*. And I did. Sometimes, you need to just sit on the shore a bit.

Maybe you've been there, too—when all you want is to retreat, shut down, and stay near the shore.

Peter was tired—they were all tired. This was more than just a bad day of fishing. It was the tired that comes from feeling like you can never get ahead, like life is a rigged game, and the cards never go your way.

IV.

Several years ago, I participated in a poverty simulation held in our gym. During the simulation, participants role-play a month of living in poverty and experience the challenges faced by low-income families in an effort to better understand poverty. By the end of the simulation, I was utterly discouraged, defeated, and a bit angry, too. Just as I managed to earn enough to cover my rent, I received a card indicating that my child was sick, and I had to miss work to take her to urgent care. No insurance. No pay for missed work. And now a medical bill. From there, I was behind the rest of the simulation, unable to catch up. After two and a half hours, I was exhausted. I remember thinking during the debriefing time, "I don't know if I could be half as strong as some of the people who have no choice but to keep throwing out their nets day after day only to have them come back empty."

When I think of that tired, I think of Simon and the fishermen, sitting on that shore, washing their nets, knowing they worked hard all day and are only further in debt, because that was the life of poor fishermen in those days, that is life for many in poverty today.

But Jesus steps into Simon's boat and life, and tells him, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." (Luke 5:4)

And we say, "Jesus, I've tried this more than once, and the nets come up empty. Why try again?"

Yet Simon, weary as he is, responds with a phrase that changes everything: "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

That's faith.

Simon has fallen into a hole, and Jesus climbs in with him and says, "I know the way out, Simon. Do what I say. Follow me." Simon doesn't yet know if Jesus will fill his nets. I don't think he has enough energy or hope to believe anything else is possible. But he knows that Jesus is with him,

and there is something different about this Jesus, which is enough to encourage Simon to try again.

V.

The Greek word for "deep" in this passage is bathos. It's the same word used in Romans 8:38-39: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor (bathos) the deep, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Even in the deep, where exhaustion, failure, and uncertainty are common, we are not separated from God's love. Even when rulers, powers, and systems seem to hold all the cards, we are not separated from God's love.

This story in Luke 5 is often interpreted as a call to evangelism—to cast our nets wider. But what if it is primarily a call to go deeper? Jesus invites Simon into the depths. The catch is overwhelming and abundant. Yet, instead of celebrating, Simon falls to his knees and exclaims, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (v.8)

His boat is overflowing, but so is his realization: he has been living in the depths. The depths are where our failures haunt us, where our struggles surface, and where our exhaustion betrays us. But any good therapist, teacher, or mentor worth their weight pushes us to do the deep work because they know that is where transformation happens.

Jesus knows, too. Because sometimes, when Jesus calls us into deep waters, the deepest truths about ourselves rise to the surface. It is the most courageous thing to say, "I am exhausted. I am hurting. My nets are empty."

It is the most courageous thing to admit, "I am not who I pretend to be. I am not who I want to be. I am not okay."

And it is from the deep that Jesus brings abundance. Jesus provides for Simon and the others the very thing that will set them free to follow Jesus wholeheartedly.

Jesus doesn't leave Simon in the depths. He calls him forward: "Come with me. From now on, you'll be catching people." (v.10)

And Simon leaves everything—his boat, his nets, even his miraculous catch—to follow Jesus up out of the pit.

VI.

At the beginning, we heard Leo McGarry's story—the friend who didn't just throw advice or prayers from above but jumped into the hole because he had been there before and knew the way out. That's what encouragement looks like.

That's what Jesus does in Luke 5. He doesn't stand on the shore and shout instructions. He doesn't simply offer a motivational speech or a scripture to memorize. He doesn't blame Simon for his struggles. Jesus steps into Simon's boat. He enters Simon's situation, his exhaustion, frustration, and failure, and goes with him into the deep, where Simon's life is forever changed.

That's what true encouragement is. It's not just words—it's presence. It's about showing up. It's about stepping into the depths with someone and saying, "I've been here before, and I know the way out."

And that's our calling as Christ's followers. Who in your life needs you to step into the boat with them? Who needs to hear, "You're not alone. I've been here, and I'll help you through this."

Encouragement is a gift that calls people from despair into possibility, from empty nets to overflowing ones, from frustration to faith, from discouragement to encouragement.

Are you exhausted today? Discouraged? Jesus is with you and can show you the way out. Trust him, go to the deep with him, and follow him.

For the rest of us, we are called to be people of encouragement—not standing on the shore, not tossing down thoughts and prayers, but climbing into the boat, stepping into the deep, and reminding each other:

"As long as I have a job, you have one."

"As long as I have breath, you are not alone."

"As long as Christ is with us, we have hope."

May we be those kinds of people.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.