

October 7, 2018
PETER – If You Say So
Rev. Dr. John Ross
Scripture Luke 5:1-11

Inside the sacristy of the Cathedral of St. Mary in Toledo, Spain, is a ceiling fresco by Luca Giordano. Also, the famed *Disrobing of Christ* by El Greco, and dozens of other sixteenth and seventeenth works of art. It's remarkable, but outside the sacristy, just outside the door, to the right of the entrance into the sacristy is an oil painting of a crucifixion in which the man hanging on the cross is hung upside down. I knew immediately who I thought it was, just from my understanding of tradition and scripture, and my hunch was confirmed when I got close and could read the little plaque next to the painting. It was titled *The Maritimo de San Pedro - The Martyrdom of Saint Peter* – upside down on a cross. This was how St. Peter's life ended. He was executed at the hand of the Roman Emperor Nero in about the year 65 or so, but this would not be the end of his ministry and his impact, nor was this the beginning. You see, Simon Peter's life and legacy would live on as perhaps the most important of all the disciples of Jesus, and where it began is our scripture passage for today. Luke 5:1-11. Give attention to the calling of Simon Peter, The Rock.

(Rustin reads Luke 5:1-11.)

As we begin, I want to invite you to take out your Weekly Inspire. You can fold it in half, and right there on the back side there's a little space where you can take some notes along the way. It's our hope, it's our prayer, it's our expectation that God might have a word for you this day that's worth remembering, and you might need to write it down. You can fold it up, put it in your pocket, and take it home with you and be blessed in this week to come.

As we begin, let's bow together in prayer: Gracious and loving God, as a gift of your Spirit open this story to us. Help us to see ourselves in it, and, as we look back, help us to see what you have for us ahead. Amen.

So, today we begin a sermon series on a character that I've always admired and really wanted to preach about for more than 25 years of ministry, just never really have done it directly because he is all through the scripture, and he's got this bigger than life personality and this huge presence in our Gospels. Simon, or Simon Peter as he would become known was born Simon Bar Jonah. Simon was born Simon Bar Jonah or Simon, son of John. Now, full disclosure, we're going to have a little combination Bible study and sermon today, a little bit of both as we set up this series. So, going right to the beginning, Simon grew up in a little town named Bethsaida. It was a little fishing town on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. His father, John or Jonah, was a fisherman, and Peter and his brother Andrew were also fisherman. It was their livelihood. It was their business. It's how they provided for themselves and for their families, and they were partners.

Now, we have to look beyond the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. We have to look into the Gospel of John, and we have to read some historians to get the full picture of Peter. It's in those other places where we learn things like Simon being married to a woman from Capernaum, which was another small shoreline town, maybe just about four miles away from where Peter was raised. He broke with

tradition, which would become kind of a hallmark of Peter's, and keep in mind when I say Peter, I also mean Simon, and when I say Simon, I also mean Peter. When I say Simon Peter, I mean Simon Peter. But Simon Peter married a girl from Capernaum, and instead of her moving to his home in Bethsaida, he moved to her home in Capernaum. I'm not exactly sure why he broke with tradition. It might have been just better fishing over in Capernaum. It could have been maybe a better market for the fish he caught, but we also have pretty good evidence that the taxes were cheaper on that side of the river. So, whatever the reason is, he landed in Capernaum, which is where he was residing when he first met Jesus. He was living in Capernaum with this wife, with his mother-in-law which must have been fun and also with his brother Andrew, and they lived there, and they stayed there until one day, Andrew, his brother, came in and announced, "We have found the Messiah!" This was huge. This was big news for them. You see, Andrew had begun following a man named John. John was baptizing thousands of people in the River Jordan, and Andrew, according to John's Gospel, brought Simon to hear John and to be baptized, and that was when and where they first encountered this man named Jesus.

Now, Jesus must have immediately seen something in Simon. Jesus must have wanted to immediately connect with him in a really kind of personal way, and the reason I say that is because in John 1 it reports that when they first met, Jesus immediately gave Simon a nickname. You know, we do that with each other – right? – when we have affection with somebody or are trying to create a connection, we give one another nicknames – right? Jesus immediately gave Simon a nickname. It says in John 1, "You are Simon, son of John, but you will be called Sephas. That's the Aramaic word for the Greek word that means Petros, which is Peter in English, and in all those languages, it means 'the rock.' So, Simon now, with his very cool new nickname, The Rock, begins following Jesus, and over a few very short years would become the most influential, passionate, and if nothing else, most memorable, of the Twelve Apostles. In Peter we have a model for what it means to follow Jesus, not with perfection but with passion, not without fear, but always with faith, and not just with part of who we are, but, as we'll see in the next four weeks, like Peter, with our heart and mind and soul and all our strength.

In the New Testament, there are over 150 references to Peter. Now, if that doesn't sound like much, consider the fact that all the other disciples, all totaled, are mentioned less than 50 times. Peter more than 150. Peter is uniquely present in all the very significant moments of the Gospels. Even when others aren't around, Peter's always there, and he's not just there by accident. Jesus invites him specifically, like the Transfiguration. Remember that? Jesus went up on the mount with Peter, James and John. When Jairus' daughter died and they showed up too late to save her, Jesus invites Peter and a couple others into the room for that amazing resurrection that happened. Peter was among the small group that went with Jesus into the garden on that night of betrayal, when Jesus wanted them to do nothing but just stay away with him – right? They couldn't even do that.

Peter has the distinction as the only one of the disciples who walked on water, even though it didn't last long – right? - because he started to sink. He has the distinction of having sliced off the ear of the Roman guard when they came for Jesus on that night in the garden. Peter has the distinction of being the only disciple that Jesus actually called Satan, a lovely distinction, don't you think? We also know that Jesus called him The Rock. We know that Jesus said he would give Peter the keys to the kingdom, and that's why all the really bad jokes about the Pearly Gates have to do with St. Peter – because he's the one holding the keys. And, in a post-resurrection scene, Jesus asks Peter specifically to care for his sheep, to tend his flock, that post-resurrection on the same shoreline where Jesus says to Peter three times, "Feed my sheep. Feed my sheep. Feed my sheep." To be clear, there's a special place in Jesus' heart for Peter which must have made that triple denial all the more painful for all of them. These things. They're all Simon Peter.

It's remarkable how pervasive he is in our story and how compelling he is as a character – fully human, flawed, fearful, faithful and, thankfully, like the rest of us, forgiven.

So, we're going to spend this month of October looking at Simon Peter, The Rock, and in our remaining moments this morning, we're going to start where it all began, really, with this call story Rustin just read out, the call of Peter, that day when Jesus turned a fisherman into one who would fish for people. So, we're just going to stay right in the story for a couple minutes, and I need the hospitality of your imagination to help us bring this image and this story to life. It says, "Once Jesus was standing beside the Lake of Gennesaret, (That's just another name for the Sea of Galilee.) and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God. He saw two boats there at the shore of the lake, and the fishermen were cleaning their nets." Now, this is just the setting that we have. We know that we can guess pretty confidently that it was the morning, because people didn't really go out in crowds in the heat of the mid-day. We can guess that it's morning because the fishermen are cleaning their nets. They've been out fishing all night long, and now they're cleaning their nets to put them away so they don't rot until the next time they use them. All these things add up to a pretty unique setting.

When this happened, Jesus got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then, he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. This is the first of two requests we're going to hear in the passage. This first request on the surface seems pretty insignificant. It's not a big deal. Jesus just wants to borrow Peter's boat – right? Jesus needs something. Crowds are pressing in on him, and the water's behind him. He has nowhere to go, but also people can't hear him so well because the crowds are so big. Any of you ever been out on the lake, just maybe a hundred yards or so from the shoreline, in a boat and spoken out loud, or have you been on the shoreline, and there's somebody out on a boat, about a hundred yards out, and their just talking in a normal voice? What happens? You can hear every word they're saying – right? You know what I'm talking about? You're all staring at me like I'm from Mars. Do you know what I'm talking about? It's amazing. You can be a couple hundred yards out in the water and speak in a normal voice, and, unless it's super windy or stormy or wavy, you can hear every word.

Jesus needs something. He just needs to borrow Peter's boat. He needs to get off the land, he needs to get out, and he needs to teach the people. It seems like a small request – right? – and sometimes we think small things don't much matter, but they do matter. In this case, they matter because Jesus is truly trying to invest in and trying to engage Peter. He knows him already. He had met him. He'd given him this nickname, and now he needs to borrow his boat. Sometimes we think small things don't matter, specific things don't really change the world, but they do. They do matter, and they have the potential for changing the world. Just think what would have happened if Peter had said, "No!" What if Peter had just said, "Tell it to the hand, Jesus," and walked off, and this thing never happened? We maybe aren't sitting here right now, and that isn't just an overstated dramatic comment.

Small things matter. Just think about your day so far. What brought you to this place? A small thing - you got up. Small thing - you showered, I hope. Small thing - you got dressed. Small thing - you drove here. Small thing - you walked in. Small thing - you're here. But together these small things add up to the Church of Christ, right here, gathered together, and think for a minute about all the small things that needed to happen to make this worship moment possible: The volunteer receptionists who proof every word of the bulletins. Allie Hendley who stuffs every bulletin with that Weekly Inspire. The plans on that Weekly Inspire that began over a year ago. All small things. Ushers who came early and picked up the pews and prepared the space for us. The choirs who rehearsed on Wednesday and parked far, far away to leave spaces for you, I hope. The childcare workers who are downstairs, lovingly setting out the toys

and preparing the space for the smallest ones. Our staff member Ina, who follows the example of Oksana, and walks these pews every week to make sure everything is just in the right place and says a prayer as she goes along. The deacons, on a communion Sunday. Are you kidding? There are a million small things that they do to get ready for this time. Danielle, after the service, will be out at the Hello spot to greet you. Lindy will be over by the prayer room. They're all small things, and they all matter.

Jesus needed to borrow Peter's boat, and Jesus needs to borrow your boat, too. Small things. "For then he sat down and taught the crowds from that boat." We never really know the good that come from our small efforts like Peter's to lend Jesus his boat. Jesus wants to borrow your boat, too, but there's more. We read on where it says, "When he had finished speaking (when he finished preaching), he said to Simon, "Push out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch. Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing." Jesus wants Peter to go deep, and this is a big request. This is a huge request. This is a "go big or go home" moment for Jesus and Peter. Keep in mind, first century fishing is not the fishing we have today. First of all, especially since it was their livelihood, they did it smart. They did it at night because they knew if they fished at night and just had a little lantern hanging over the boat, it would draw the fish in, they could cast the nets, and the fish wouldn't see the nets coming, and they could catch a big catch. And fishing with these nets – you know, just imagine those. Again go in your mind's eye – those nets. If you used them all night long, just think how nasty those things would get – just dirty and slippery and stinky – right?

And they had to be cleaned every day or they would rot, and the nets had already been cleaned. They were already put away. They fished all night with nets, and they caught zippo. Anybody in the room fish all night with a net and caught zippo? Okay, I've been close. Up at Lake Mille Lacs last January, I fished all night, but I was in a little warm hut. I put my line down in the water and went to bed, caught zippo, and I was still pretty grump the next morning. And yet, it's in that exact context that Jesus asks Peter for more than just to borrow his boat but instead, also, to go deep, to go deep and to let down the perfectly cleaned and put-away nets. Now, set aside your Biblical sensitivities, your naiveté, and get real with this passage. Think about what Peter's real response would have been – right? – in your own mind.

Given everything you know now and Jesus says, "Go out there and drop the nets." Peter's saying, "Do what? Oh, Jesus Ch..., oh, sorry." He says, "Do what? Are you crazy?" He says, "I loaned you my boat. I acted interested during your sermon. I'm tired. I smell. My hands are bleeding. I've got some kind of a rash. I just want to go home and go to bed." I think that's Peter's real response, and I think that if we stop right there, that's his way of saying, "No."

Jesus has made a big ask of Peter, and I'm here to tell you that Jesus is making big asks of us as well, especially when we do things collectively and together. We're called to do some big things here in the coming year. Starting next week, you're going to hear about them as we begin our efforts to invite your generosity for next year. We're going to do some big things, and we're going to make a big request of you for next year. We're going to ask all of you to consider giving at least ten percent more than what you gave this year, and I know that's a big request. For some of you that won't be manageable, but for a whole bunch of others of you it will be totally manageable because you'll understand why. There's lots of reasons but one of which we're going to ask for that big request next year is that we're going to take something that started small, but it's getting bigger, and we're going to take it to a whole new level.

By the generous leadership of Leslie Neugent, we have one of the most impactful and profoundly important ministries in this church. It's called Parables, and for all those six years, Leslie Neugent has given herself tirelessly to it. She's on a sabbatical now – well deserved, and when she gets back, we're

going to conceive a position, a paid position, a full-time paid position for this ministry, and it's going to take all of us to do this together. It's a big ask, but it really matters, and just like Jesus asked of Peter to go deep, we want to go deep with Parables among other things for next year. That's just one example, but it we're going to go deep, and we're going to go big, it's going to take all of us.

You know, for years, I've done the same thing when I've asked someone to do something big. Some of you are smiling because you know what I'm about to say. When I've asked you to give something big, when I've asked you to take on a big job, I always say, "Say no first and see how that feels." Say no first and see how that feels. I think this is Peter saying, "No." In verse 5A he says, "Master, we've worked all night long but have caught nothing. That's Peter's 'no,' but verse 5B may be the reason we're all sitting in this room together. Peter says, "but if you say so, I will let down the nets." "But if you say so." Those words, followed by the impossible becoming possible, those words followed by a miracle happening, those words followed by a blessing received, those words can be our words, too.

Jesus wants to borrow your boat, but Jesus also wants you to go deep. Against all odds, against all common sense, against everything in our culture, Jesus is asking you to push out in the deep, and I know you're saying to yourself, "Come on, JR, Jesus isn't talking to me. This is kinda weird. This is spooky kinda Pentecostal sort of stuff. Jesus isn't talking to me. Besides, I don't have much to give. I don't have anything. I can't do this. I can't do that. Jesus isn't talking to me."

And I'd say, "Are you sure about that?" Do you really search your heart? Have you felt a little nudge sometime in the last few weeks? Something that you feel like you're supposed to do, especially if it's something small? Have you heard that still, quiet voice that's inviting you into something big? It starts really small and quiet and then calls you out into the deep waters. Have you, like Peter, and like me, first responded with reluctance and said, "No" and left it at no?

My invitation to you today is use the words of Peter, "If you say so, if you say so." Small things become big. Miracles happen. The impossible becomes possible, and blessings follow. I confess that way too often, I feel a nudge, or I hear a voice, and I feel reluctant, but I think if you're at all like me, and you've had that same experience, you know that when you do decide to say yes, when you do simply say, "If you say so" remarkable things happen – in our lives and in our world.