

## ***WHOM SHALL I SEND?***

a sermon based on Isaiah 6:1-8

Luke 5:1-11

by the Rev. Dr. Stephen R. Hanning

First Congregational United Church of Christ

2624 Rockefeller, Everett, WA 98201

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Many years ago the great explorer, Sir Francis Drake, was attempting to recruit a crew of young men to join him for an upcoming exploration. He gathered them around and told them that if they came with him they would see some of the most amazing things their eyes could ever behold: sandy white beaches, trees bearing huge, juicy, ripe fruits, exotic cultures, beautiful landscapes, priceless treasures, and gorgeous women. And he told them that this wonderful experience would be theirs if they came with him. Not one of them enlisted for the journey. The next day a different group came out and this time Drake tried a different strategy. He told them that if they came with him, they would encounter storms that would totally terrify them. He said that tiger winds would hammer their ship and would likely blow it off course for months. Water would frequently be scarce and at times they would be so thirsty that their very souls would cry out for simply one drop of water. In short, danger would be their constant companion. Drake concluded by declaring that if they thought they could handle these things, then perhaps he might consider taking them with him as his crew and they would have an experience that would exceed their wildest dreams. Every single one of them joined Sir Francis Drake that day. Some didn't even go home to say goodbye to their families. They just boarded the ship and eager for the journey.

What made the difference between these two groups? Why did the first group turn down the mission and the second jump at the chance? Was the second group more courageous or more adventurous than the first? Probably not. The difference was not in the men but in the message. The first group probably had no need for the scenic wonders Drake described. What they needed was a challenge that gave their lives meaning. That's why the second group responded so positively to Drake's invitation. The first spoke of rewards; the second spoke of challenges. The first offered comfort; the second promised suffering. The first tempted them with things; the second promised them the chance to temper the steel of their souls.

Isaiah had a vision. In this vision, heavenly beings called seraphs appeared to him. As God's special messengers, the seraphs reflected God's holiness and since the Israelites believed that mere mortals were so unworthy that they dare not look upon even the reflection of God's holiness, the three pair of wings served the function of shielding God's holiness from their eyes. It sounds weird but think of it as watching a solar eclipse. If we watch it without some kind of polarized or specially tinted glass, the brightness will burn the retinas of our eyes and we will lose our sight. So, the Israelites feared that if they looked upon God's holiness, they would not just lose their sight, they would die.

You can be sure that Isaiah's vision had him shook up. In the presence of the seraphs, he was acutely aware of his UN-holiness. Recall what he said when he saw them: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Like I say, he was shook. He felt that his unworthiness disqualified him for serving God. We can hear the echo of Moses saying to God, "You can't send me back to Egypt to free the Hebrew slaves because I will fail. I am not eloquent. Besides, they won't believe me if I say that You sent me." Not only did he feel unworthy. He was afraid.

Peter, James, and John. They were very much like you and I. Their daily lives were as hum drum as anyone's. They lived paycheck-to-paycheck, day-to-day. The feeding of their families depended on a little bit of skill, dogged persistence, and a whole lot of luck. Every morning, when they arrived for work one question dominated their lives: Will we be lucky and catch some fish today? Everything rode on whether or not they caught any fish.

Back in the 1960's, the great blues singer, Peggy Lee came out with a song, "Is That all There Is?" The song starts out with the experience of watching a house burn down, and she croons, "Is that all there is? If that's all there is, my friends, then let's keep dancing and break out the booze and have a ball, if that's all there is." If your house burns down and you have nothing else to show for your life, then you probably would feel like saying, "Is that all there is?"

On this particular day they had no luck. Each cast of the net came back empty. The fish were nowhere to be found. Enter here Jesus of Nazareth, a friend who offered them a change. "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch," he said. Peter's response is like anyone who has worked all day at an unsuccessful project. "Master, we've worked all night and haven't caught a thing. But if you insist, we'll let down the nets one more time." [Luke 5:4-5] What happened next was a miracle. Where once there were no fish now there were so many they had to call for the second boat to handle the load and the number of fish nearly sank both of them.

The same thing happened to the great musician George Frederick Handel. He was dogged with misfortune. He had debt upon debt, despair upon despair. He had a cerebral hemorrhage and was paralyzed on his right side. For four years he could neither walk nor write. The doctors could do nothing more for him. He managed to write several operas, but still he fell into debt. At age 60 he thought his life was finished. Then he was challenged by a friend to write a sacred oratorio. He read the Scriptures and went to work. For 24 days, he slept or ate very little. He worked fanatically to produce the piece. Before he had begun to work on it, Handel was convinced that his life was over. Was this all there is? A lifetime of composing with little to show for it but a lot of music that nobody wanted and financial ruin. He had thought his work was finished but, having been encouraged by a friend, he wrote his crowning achievement: "*Messiah*." And today, it is considered one of the greatest oratorios ever written.

Life can often look hum drum and it can even look grim. But change can happen just that quick. Jesus knew there were fish yet to be caught and Handel's friend knew their was music yet to be written. Both situations seemed hopeless. Peter speaks for everyone of us who are dubious but willing to try again, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet, if you say so, I will let down the nets." [Luke 5:5]

Now of course the real change that occurred that day was not their luck in fishing. The real change would occur when they got to shore. Just as Isaiah felt unworthy in the presence of God, Peter felt unworthy in the presence of Jesus. "But when Simon Peter saw the huge catch, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.'" [Luke 5:8]

But God had said to Isaiah, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" [Isaiah 6:8] And Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will be catching people." I have a story.

Irwin Shaw wrote a short story called The Eighty-Yard Run. As a college freshman, at his first football practice, he broke loose for an 80-yard touchdown run. His teammates looked at him with awe. His coach said, "You're going to have quite a future around here." His girlfriend awarded him with a kiss after the practice and Irwin Shaw had the feeling that life was completely satisfying and rewarding.

But nothing in the rest of his life ever lived up to that day again. His football experience was terribly disappointing. His marriage soured. The pain of failure was even greater because he remembered thinking on a perfect day many years before that life would always be that pleasant, that satisfying, that rewarding.

Life does not stand still. It isn't a once-for-all experience. Winston Churchill once said, "Success is never final. Failure is never fatal. It is courage that counts." As we all know, there are good days and there are bad days. Given the fact that we seem to remember the bad days and forget the good days, we would likely agree with the expression, "if it weren't for bad luck, we wouldn't have any luck at all!" Or as Peggy Lee would say, "Is that all there is? If that's all there is, my friends, then let's keep dancing and break out the booze and have a ball, if that's all there is." So, some days we will fall on our faces. These failures don't have to be the last word.

Failure opens us to the reality that we don't have all the answers. We aren't perfect. Like the college football hero in Irwin Shaw's story, we realize that success is usually here today and gone tomorrow. Failure helps us to see how we might improve if we can only forgive ourselves for failing. And that can be the avenue that leads us to experience God's grace.

Jesus of Nazareth got into the boat with the three defeated men. He sat down and taught the people on the shore from the boat. Then, when he had ceased teaching, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." [Luke 5:4] When we have failed, perhaps many times, we are ready to hear God say, "Put out into the deep water. Take a risk. Let down your nets once more into the

same place where you had failed to catch anything before. Trust in me,” says God. Whenever we rely solely on ourselves, we set ourselves up for a huge letdown because we are human. But when we trust in God, we don’t have to go it alone. Everything doesn’t ride on our skill or even our luck. In fact, luck has nothing to do with it. Failure is a part of success. Once we realize that, we can put down the facade we’re hiding behind and know that God doesn’t care about the times we’ve failed, only that we are willing to trust and serve Him.

When Jesus found Peter and the other fishermen, he could see they were discouraged and ready to give up. But he could also see something else. He could see their courage and their faith. He knew they would not settle for the easy life, even if it were offered to them. Sir Francis Drake discovered what Jesus had known all along. The good life, with all its charms, can be satisfying for a while but it eventually fails to satisfy. The paths that are offered to us will shape our values and our character in one way or another. Poet Jan McIntosh a poem entitled, *“Fisher's Of Women & Men.”*

“Have you caught any fish, have you ever tried?  
Don’t you know that you’re the one for whom Jesus died?  
Have you cast your net out on the sea,  
Or is it lying crumpled, there at your feet?  
Do you cling to the shore, afraid to sail?  
Do you refuse to go, afraid you'll fail?  
There's only one way to be a fisher of women & men –  
Take up your net and go follow Him.”

When all is said and done, if we choose the path of least resistance, then we will have little to show for it. But, if we accept Jesus’ invitation to follow him, if we take the road less traveled, the path that involves greater risk, the course that promises more pain and suffering, we will discover that God has been and will be with us all the way, giving us strength for the journey and hope for a new day. “Here am I, Lord. Send me!”

And let the people say, “Amen.”