

What If?

November 14, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Luke 5: 1-11

Are there times in your life when you've turned and gone in an unexpected direction? Tried something a new way? When you abandoned what you'd been planning for a different idea? Was there a time when everything changed? Who was it that offered you that new idea? What made you willing to take the risk of changing your direction? Do you ever wonder what it would be like if you hadn't followed? Or maybe you didn't go there -- you didn't take that new direction, and you've always wondered what might have been. Our lives are full of intersections – we wonder, “What if?”

Up until this point in Luke's gospel, there are only a few named characters: Mary, Joseph and Jesus, along with a few kings and emperors for context. Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan and tempted by the devil in the wilderness, and then began teaching in Galilee, Nazareth, and Capernaum to “the crowds”, or “everyone in the synagogue”, or just “they” – unnamed multitudes of people who heard him teach and followed him, wanting more. The story shifts at the end of Luke's fourth chapter, when Jesus enters the home of a specific person -- Simon -- and does something new and different. Instead of teaching, Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law. The very next verses then, at the opening of chapter 5, are our story for today.

Jesus is teaching on the lakeshore but having a difficult time because the crowd is so large. So, he commandeers a fishing boat belonging to the son-in-law of the woman he had just healed. Coincidence? Or good storytelling? It's an odd story, though. Basically, Jesus, who doesn't necessarily know anything about fishing, thinks he can give fishing advice to career fishermen, and doesn't appear to notice just how exhausted and frustrated they all are. They had been working all night and had caught nothing. They were almost finished cleaning their nets, so they could go home and get some sleep, when Jesus asked Simon to row him back out onto the lake, so he could more easily speak to the crowds. So, they rowed. Jesus taught, and then, as if that distraction and delay wasn't enough, after he finished teaching, he suggested that they go out fishing again – out to the deeper water. How do you think that made the tired fishermen feel? Why wouldn't they just say no?

Jesus must have had some amount of authority already (remember healing his mother-in-law), because Simon says, (was it eagerly?) “If you say so.” Or maybe it was mockingly, “if you say so.” They go back out, and try it Jesus' way, and ... catch so many fish that *everyone* was amazed – all of the fishermen in the boats, and also Luke tells us, James and John as well, even though they weren't there at the time. And then what did they do after such success? Did they arrange for Jesus to go with them the next time to help them find more waters that were teeming with fish? Nope. They quit fishing altogether. One day they were on their familiar path, hauling in fish to feed their community, doing what they expected to be doing, and then all of sudden, everything changed.

I've been hearing the refrain of that story again and again this week – among the 1,200 people who joined a spontaneous Facebook group to mourn together and celebrate the life of Larry Gordon, who died on Tuesday after a tragic bicycle accident near his home in Vermont. Larry brought a revival of Sacred Harp music to Vermont in the 70s, traveled to Georgia and Alabama to learn how the music lived within those communities, started the annual New England Sing, and founded several choruses and camps for teens and adults learning traditional songs and Balkan dance, who then toured here and, in the UK, eastern Europe, and South Africa. I looked back at our building reservations in our financial records and see that Larry brought his Village Harmony to perform here at First Church ten times over the past dozen years. It was all about the music, but so much more – about allowing people to be authentically themselves and to relate to each other with life-changing care and compassion. Many recounted how they signed up for one of Larry's summer camps and it changed their lives: “I would not be who I am today without Larry Gordon and the music he taught.”

Some of you may have heard me tell the story of the first time I was ever in this church back in 1989, right in this very spot, with Norumbega Harmony, making our first recording of Sacred Harp music. Back in those days, I sang every Monday and many weekends, immersed in the music and the community of singers. I, too, heard the music and was hooked and drawn in in an instant and my first Convention in Vermont was magical. Hugh McGraw, one of the George singers, once famously said that he'd drive clear across the state to sing Sacred Harp, but he wouldn't cross the street to listen to it. It's a participatory thing. You either love it or not, and there's not much in between. You feel it and it meets

you in your soul. I think it was that way with the people who heard Jesus. Many of them heard the message, deep in their souls, and were forever changed. They went all in, leaving their nets and their families and joining in his ministry of healing and change.

What about you? Are there times that your life took an unexpected new direction? What happened? Was it some new way of thinking about something? Or was it the way you felt? Was it a door closing? Or a new opportunity? Have you, like the people fishing, left your nets behind to embark on a new journey? Was it exciting? Or sad? Or scary? Or all three? What did you learn about yourself?

Day in and day out, God invites us to consider how we are investing our one wild and precious life. Sure, there are times when we have to do things we'd rather not do, but on the whole, are your priorities aligned with how you spend your time? If not, where are you being called? Remember, the way Luke tells the story wouldn't even be a story if they hadn't followed Jesus' advice to try the deeper water. What if Jesus said, "try the deeper water" and they had said, "Sorry, we're really tired and we're going home to rest up for more fishing tomorrow." There'd be no deep water, no miraculous catch, no dropping everything to follow Jesus. They'd still be fishing.

Sometimes contemplating change is difficult and overwhelming. Finding the courage to try something a new way is scary. But that's what Jesus calls us to do. Whether it's a new way of understanding the environment and our own daily routines, or revelations about history, or white privilege, or money, or adjusting priorities for family or love, this community of faith gives us a safe place – a sanctuary – to explore a new way.

Now, this is Stewardship Sunday and I'm your Minister of Stewardship & Finance, so you won't be surprised when I turn this sermon toward stewardship and giving. As we consider our stewardship pledges for next year, what if we risk thinking about our giving differently? Jesus teaches us that care for each other and loving our neighbors is at the core of who we are as human beings.

If the gospel message has changed your life, do your spending priorities reflect that, living a life that embodies your faith? If you've been attending and maybe offering a cash gift now and then, what if you took a step into our community and made a gift by text? If you've been making occasional gifts to First Church, what if you risked making a commitment to give monthly? In my years of ministry, I've met people who weren't sure about pledging because they were only involved occasionally, but once they pledged, it felt different to them, and they participated more often. If you've been giving from what's left over at the end of the week or the end of the month, what if you set aside your giving from the first part of your paycheck or your monthly budget? One of the new members of the very first church I served explained to me that he had a separate bank account, into which he put a regular percentage of every paycheck. Then he made his charitable contributions from that account. This practice of proportional giving, by a percentage, not a dollar amount, became a discipline – and then he found himself with a pool of money from which he could share, based on his priorities. It felt different – and joyful, even. Rufus Cushman, who I met in New England UCC Stewardship meetings years ago told a story of going to do financial planning for their retirement. The advisor looked at their figures and said, "The first thing you'll need to do is to reduce your charitable giving." Rufus and his wife said, "No, you don't understand. First, we set aside 10%. The remaining 90% is what you have to work with." Whatever your situation, what if you were to take this opportunity to think differently about why and how you give to others?

As we consider our pledges – both of our time and involvement, and our financial pledges for 2022 – we are excited about what is possible. Trusting in God's promise of abundance, we are confident that when each of us makes our own individual commitment, the fabric of our community is strengthened. We invite you to think differently about how you make your pledging decision this year. Listen for Jesus' call be willing to change direction and take a new risk, and trust that following Jesus is the best decision for you and your life. Amen!