

Series: Stretched by Jesus

“Astonished!”

Introduction: We’re looking in this season of Epiphany, this season of revelation and greater clarity, at ways in which Jesus stretched the hearts and the minds of those who encountered him. We’re considering texts in which we read that those who heard or saw Jesus in action were amazed, astonished, or puzzled in some way. So far, we’ve seen him stretch his parents as, when a young boy, he talked about his relationship with a heavenly Father, and that he had to be in his “Father’s house.” As he launched his ministry, he stretched those who heard him speak at a synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth as he revealed that God’s amazing grace would extend past the borders of their country to include those who were far different than them, to those who were even their enemies. And we’ve seen Jesus stretch those who heard him teach in the synagogue in Capernaum with an authority that far exceeded their own teachers, and which even extended to healing illnesses and casting out demons.

This morning we’ll see Jesus stretch a fisherman named Simon as Jesus directs Simon (who we also know as Peter) and his colleagues toward an astonishing catch of fish. What we’ll be stretched to consider from this encounter is that we are all more sinful—much further from God’s intention for us—than we might suspect, but we are also more loved than we could ever ask or imagine. While we might even want to push Jesus away, he, remarkably, wants to come near and have us participate in his healing purposes in the world. So, let’s go down to the lake and see how this plays out. [READ]

I. Down at the Lake

A. As we have observed Jesus the last few Sundays, he’s mostly been in the synagogues in the towns around the Lake of Gennesaret (Sea of Galilee). Today, however, we meet him at the shore of that lake, at the place where people came out to swim and to fish. It’s a quick lesson for us to see that Jesus does not just wait for folk to come to a house of worship on the Sabbath; he also goes to where they hang out during the week and seeks to connect with them there as well. Reports about him had evidently begun to spread such that the crowd appeared to be nudging him out into the water as he taught. So, in a neat bit of resourcefulness, Jesus hopped into one of the boats pulled up on the shore and asked if it’s owner, Simon, wouldn’t mind anchoring a little way out so that Jesus could teach the crowd from there. The shoreline in this area actually consists of a number of small yet steep inlets and would have formed a kind of natural amphitheater, making it easy for the crowd to see him and hear him speak. So, after Simon set the anchor, Luke tells us that Jesus sat down and taught the people from the boat.

B. What did he teach them? Well, we don’t know for sure. His plan, as we left him last week, was to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God throughout the area (4:43). That meant that he was talking about how the rule of God had begun to come, through his arrival, on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus was teaching about how, through him, God was going to sort out all that had gone wrong in the world and enable the human race live within the realm of His goodness.

C. However, it seemed like one of the primary lessons on that day was more particular than that. For, after Jesus had finished speaking to the crowd, he instructed Simon to pull up his anchor and head out into deeper water. Once there, he said, “let down your nets.” In all honesty, Simon didn’t think this

was a very good idea. He was a seasoned fisherman, he knew these waters, he and his partners had been up all night and the fish just weren't running right now. All he wanted to do was go back to mending his nets, then consume a hearty breakfast, and finally, take a nap! And yet . . .

Before going further, can't we understand Simon's mindset? Don't we sometimes approach Jesus in that way? "Jesus," we might say, "I'm the expert here. This is my field. I've been trained. I really know what I'm doing. Just let me take care of it." Or perhaps we might say, "Jesus, I hear what you're saying about how to handle my job, or my finances, or my marriage, or my children, or my sexuality, or my enemies, but it's my life and I know the best way to live it, so just let me follow my heart and be true to myself and we'll all be ok. So just go away Jesus and leave me be."

II. Out on the Water

A. There are many ways we might try to push Jesus away, and yet Simon took none of them. Instead, he said to Jesus, "But because you say so, I will let down the nets." What might have prompted Simon to say this? Quite possibly, it was because just a few days earlier, Jesus had been at Simon's house. There, he had healed Simon's mother-in-law of a high fever, and then he kept on healing long into the night all of their neighbors who were suffering from physical illness or spiritual sickness (4:38-41). All that Jesus had done with just a word, so, maybe his word was worth listening to. Simon, it seems, was willing to consider that Jesus just might have some wisdom that he didn't know about.

B. Well, it turns out Jesus had far more than Simon bargained for! When he let down his nets, the full force of the power of God opened and the catch was so astonishing that a second boat had to be called to help haul it all in. Even then both boats began to sink. What Simon experienced was the full-on beauty and abundance and majesty and glory of God! And, importantly, notice how it moved Simon to respond. It did not move him to rejoice and to calculate that this catch was so large that maybe he could call it a day and spend the rest of the season relaxing in the Greek Isles. Rather, it brought him to his knees as it opened to him the depth of his sin. Simon experienced the glory of God and as a result, was able to see how far short he was from that glory. It led him to consider, not a specific act of disobedience but a general sense of unworthiness, that he was much further from the glory of God than he might have suspected and that he could not remain in the presence of this incredibly holy man.

C. Up to that point in his life, I imagine that Simon thought about himself what we all tend to think – that basically we're pretty good people, especially when compared to those we hear about on the news, and though we mess up from time to time, who doesn't? But the real comparison God puts before us is found in the person of his Son, the one who can help us see clearly what a truly human life should look like. In him we see reflected the virtues in all their perfection: humility, courage, justice, patience, kindness, love for enemy, forgiveness, etc.

The 16th c. Reformation theologian, John Calvin, puts our struggle to see ourselves clearly, and our need for Jesus to help us do so, like this:

For such is our innate pride we always seem to ourselves just, and upright, and wise, and holy ... until [we] have contrasted ourselves with the majesty of God.

The majesty of God is what Simon saw in the face and in the words and in the deeds of Jesus. Such is what we all need to see. We need to have a clear picture of reality in the present, of the holiness of God and of the truth about who we are and where we're not living in harmony with that holiness so that God

can write a new story for us as we head into the future. As Jesus observed when teaching in another setting, knowing and naming the truth about ourselves, or a given situation, is an important aspect of being set free and moving forward (Jn. 8:31-32).

This is true in our national life as well as our personal life, as many are observing today, especially in the area of politics and race relations. For reconciliation to happen politically, and for the country to move forward, there can be no room for what Senator Mitch McConnell recently called “loony lies and conspiracy theories.” They are a “cancer” he stated that is destroying the nation. And like any cancer, they need to be identified and dug out. And, for racial reconciliation to happen, America’s “original sin,” as Jim Wallis describes it—the building of our country by wiping out one group of people and enslaving another—needs to be acknowledged so that it can be repented of. If these lies and sins are left to linger, healing cannot take place. As Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil has put it, “We can’t have restoration and reconciliation without first telling the truth.”

D. Significantly, as Simon began to understand the truth about himself and his unworthiness, Jesus planted another, even more astonishing truth into his soul: “Do not be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.” Simon, in other words, despite his sinfulness, was more loved by Jesus than he could ever ask or imagine. Jesus wasn’t going to go away, he wanted, incredibly, to come closer. He wanted to bring Simon to a place of forgiveness, so that he would have no reason to fear, and then to a place of great purpose, involving Simon in bringing healing to the world.

On this Super Bowl Sunday, allow me one more football illustration for the season! It’s called the “stiff arm,” and is so named because it happens when a runner carrying the ball puts out his other arm, stiffly, with the intent of knocking his opponent off of his feet and onto to the ground.

The Bible talks about the arm of God. In one place, for example, the prophet Isaiah declares: “The LORD will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God” (52:10). The picture painted here is not that of God using his arm to push us away. Rather, it’s an arm that reaches out to pull us in, to rescue us and to embrace us and draw us into his purposes. It does so as he stretches it out and lays it bare on the cross.

So, may this astonishing catch of fish that Jesus enabled stretch us. May it help us to see the glory and majesty of God so we can know that we are both more sinful than we might suspect, but also more loved than we could ever ask or imagine.