

“From Empty Nets to Full Lives”

Luke 5:1-11 – February 7, 2010

INTRO: As Jesus began to expand his ministry, he must have realized that he needed others to help him if he’s going to be able to reach lots of people. In today’s story we find him approaching some fishermen, who become his first disciples. On the shore of the Sea of Galilee, a crowd had gathered to listen to him and the number of people gets overwhelming. So Jesus climbs into a boat and goes out on the Sea of Galilee and preaches to them from the boat.

If you were to condense your life into a six word memoir, what would you say? What’s your essence? How would you tell your life story in just six words? That’s the challenge *Smith* magazine posed three years ago, to readers of their website. They didn’t know how people would respond, or whether anybody would take the challenge. Since the beginning, there have been more than 250,000 six word memoirs offered.

The precursor to all these memoirs may have been a request of Ernest Hemingway. Asked once, to write a full story in six words, legend has it that the novelist responded: “For Sale: baby shoes, never worn.”

The *Smith* website, morphed into multiple books of these six word memoirs. Here are some examples: “Nothing profound. I just sat around.” Comedian Stephen Colbert: “Well I thought it was funny.” “Ten weeks pregnant, still my secret.” “Desperately wanted sister, created imaginary friend.” “Shoes perpetually untied, yet rarely trip.” “Not planned. Not expected. Totally welcome.” Author Frank McCourt: “The miserable childhood leads to royalties.” “Loneliness—one egg in the pan.” “Turned 11, no letter from Hogwarts.” Actor Neil Patrick Harris: “Barney, Doogie, average names allude me.” “In God we trust: a travelogue.” “Ask my teenager, she knows everything.” “Never really finished anything, except cake.” “Life lived in love and service.” “Helps other people at all times.” (perhaps written by a Scout)

So, if you were to state your life’s story in just six words, what would they be? I’m tempted to just take the next ten minutes and see what we might all come up with, but since I’ve planted the idea, think about it later when you’re not watching the Superbowl.

And, what might be a six word memoir for these fishermen? “Change in plans, Had Better Offer” “Fishing Stinks, Looking for Other Options” “From Empty Nets to Full Lives”

Whatever words we might choose for them, we believe these were pretty ordinary people, who were open to some big changes in their lives. Jesus hired Simon to take him out in his boat a little way from shore and from there he could get better sightlines with the crowd that had come to hear him. He taught, sitting in the boat. The irony is that Jesus hires the boat to catch people, while Simon had used it, up to this point in his life, to catch fish. After Jesus was done teaching them, he suggests that Simon Peter and his two helpers let down their nets in the deep waters. The catch was enormous. The result being that all three left their boats and the fishing business to become fishers of people.

Up until that moment, they had been about their normal routine, and hadn’t had a good evening fishing—they came up empty. But at Jesus’ direction, they were willing to trust God for something more, and their lives were forever changed.

We’re reminded that God’s followers don’t have to be perfect or have remarkable abilities, but they do need to have a remarkable availability—they need to be open and available to God, and to the changes that may happen in their lives, through the workings of God.

When those fellows left their nets, they began a new phase in their lives. Something had changed drastically. Most of the six word memoirs on that website speak about “moments of change, moments of contrast, saying I used to be one way, but now I’m another.” (NPR, 2/3/10)

Whether we are fishermen, factory workers, architects, cooks, bank employees, most of us have known a time when we made a major change in our lives midstream. We used to be this and now we’re that. We used to do this and now we’re doing something different. One job disappears and we hope another one comes along. Because one job ended, we were finally able to try something we’d always dreamed about.

A fishing story in this week’s paper, told about perch being raised right here in Milwaukee, in the old Harnischfeger Industries building in Bay View, where mining cranes used to be made. Now Sweet Water Organics is housed there. They have a kind of tiered aquaponic set up there, where the vegetables are grown above the fish tanks, and the water is pumped between the tiers that hold

the vegetables and gravel to clean the fish water. This urban fish and vegetable farm hopes to provide greens for our salads, and 3,300 pounds of perch every two weeks for those of us who like fish fries. Imagine that, fresh perch, raised locally, on our tables. Sweet Water Organics wasn't started by a fisherman, but by a roofing contractor and his business partner. (*The Journal Sentinel*, 2/4/10) That's a change in careers, but one which may end up benefiting lots of people and helping to sustain the environment.

The majority of Jesus' followers today have jobs, homes, and commitments that we don't just leave behind. But the question may be for us is: what may God be calling us to do, that could perhaps benefit God's world in a new way? What's a new way or where's a new place we can be the hands and feet of Jesus?

A person can have full nets but still have an empty life. After you've sold the fish in the market and have a share of money in the bank, you may still feel empty and lacking. There was maybe a time in Simon's life when he dreamed of being the best fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. But even then, his dreams were limited. He knew that sea and its villages, but may not have had expectations beyond that. How often do we settle for an achievement or a dream that's hemmed in by our small expectations?

Author Dan Wakefield found himself in the middle of life, and mid-career. He seemed to be sinking into depression, anger, disillusionment. And then he met Dorothy Day—founder of the Catholic Worker Movement and a halfway house in the Bowery. Wakefield volunteered to help in the kitchen and wrote later about “a real mystique that called to young people, offering in the midst of the grim poverty of the Bowery something that all the glittering affluence around us lacked—a sense of purpose, a way of transcending self through service.” Wakefield didn't become a social worker, but he did become an intentional Christian and returned to writing, his life's work, now with a sense that it was what God wanted him to do, had gifted him to, had given him to do.

(John Buchanan “Your Life's Work”)

We need to ask ourselves “Has being a Christian made any difference in our lives?” (Martha Grace Reese) If so, then we're going to want to share this reality with other people. If our lives are better because of our relationship with God, then this kind of relationship can benefit others as well. (*Homiletics*, Feb. 2010)

Simon Peter was a second-career person, and may have felt inadequate for his new job, but with the calling come the resources to carry it out. We may doubt that what's built into us could be put to work in the service of God.

Jesus wanted Simon Peter to fish for people—to gather men and women and let them in on Christ's message. Until that moment, Simon was probably content to spend his nights on the sea, but soon found that place was too small for his soul.

Like those early disciples, we may discover we have more gifts, talents and skills than we ever thought. We are like the little boy who took the Christmas catalog to his room to make out his list for Santa. About an hour later he comes back down to the kitchen. “I thought you were making out your Christmas list” says his mother. “Where is it? Are you done already?” Yeah, I did it,” he says. “But it turns out I already have everything on my list.”

Sometimes we think we are lacking or someone else convinces us we are lacking. That can have such an effect on us that we won't stretch ourselves or go out into any kind of deeper water.

*Whale Rider* is an amazing film about a young girl's struggle to figure out who she is, which is held in check by the society around her. Pai grows up in a Maori village in New Zealand, the granddaughter of the aging tribal chief. Her grandfather has begun the search for his successor—looking for a young man with the qualities of a chief: strength, courage, intelligence, leadership. But he never thinks to look at his granddaughter—because the chief has always been a male. And here is Pai right in front of him, with those qualities built deep within her and with a kind of calling she absolutely can't let go of or ignore. Yet, she's a girl, and just one of the regular village kids.

Simon Peter is the example for us, of Jesus using an ordinary fisherman, and being able to retool him for his next career, that of spreading the word of God's love to others. Even though Simon probably didn't get up that morning, thinking he would end the day by leaving his fishing boat behind, he was open to God, and willing to make a change.

When we remain open, and at least a little flexible, we too may experience God's leadings in our lives and in our church. And what we leave behind, may not be nearly so wonderful as what we

find ahead. For God has the power to turn empty nets into amazingly full lives, or in six words:  
Lives lived in love and service.

--Sue Burwell