

**What's the catch?**  
Luke 5:1-11  
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Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God,<sup>2</sup> he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.<sup>3</sup> He 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.<sup>4</sup> When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."<sup>5</sup> Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."<sup>6</sup> When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.<sup>7</sup> So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.<sup>8</sup> But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"<sup>9</sup> For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken;<sup>10</sup> and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."<sup>11</sup> When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

If you're smart, you've always got to be looking out for "the catch." Those of us of a certain age will remember getting our music—our CDs and tapes—from Columbia House. You filled out a postcard and signed up and in the mail you could get like 9 CDs or tapes for a penny! Amazing. But, of course, once you got the free ones, you were on the list. You got another album a month later and a bill for 16.99. And you probably didn't like it—it was Billy Ocean's lesser hits or Meatloaf. My point is that nothing is free. If it looks too good to be true, there *must be a catch*.

Another place to be on the lookout for "the catch" is when you're reading Scripture or doing theology. Our Bible is queer—it's full of passages—even whole books—that are off-kilter and out of place. Same with our theological tradition—there's all this stuff that we've inherited from the past that when you look at it, some of it feels really peculiar and time-bound and doesn't bear up under scrutiny. One thing I learned in seminary is that whenever you find something in Scripture or in the tradition that feels off, you investigate it. You explore it. There's often a beautiful—even holy—revelation in the places where you find a "catch."

When I read this text from Luke again this week, I laughed when I got to the last part. After the disciples haul in this massive load of fish—a huge catch, Jesus delivers the punchline. "From now on," he says to the disciples, "*you will be catching people*."

It's a funny image—at least, at first—the idea of Jesus and the disciples running around catching people with big nets like the dog catcher in an old Tom & Jerry cartoon. Catching people; it's kinda funny. If you sit with this image a little longer, it gets less and less funny. It is this image that is the foundation for a lot of what has been called "evangelism" over the years. Catching people. Rounding them up. Hooking them. Gathering them in like fish. For what? For conversion? For consumption?

The transliteration of the Greek verb here is literally "catching them alive." No wonder they didn't put *that* in the NRSV translation. "From now on, you will be catching people alive." Is this evangelism, a human rights emergency, or a horror movie?

The Christian church is not even close to being done repenting for the abuses we've perpetrated over two thousand years by treating non-Christians as fish to be caught. The metaphor itself is based on a fallacy. It implies a qualitative difference in value between Christian and non-Christian. In the language of the philosopher Martin Buber, the metaphor proposes an "I-It" relationship. Christians are people, we are subjects, with dignity and integrity; non-Christians are fish, they are objects, there to be taken, to be used for our purposes.

Let's be honest. Fishing is not a two-way street. It's not a mutual give-and-take between fish and fisher. It's about capture and eluding capture. It's not a liberative practice.

With all due respect to Jesus, who seems to be the source of this metaphor, this is not the image of the faithful Christian life that I signed up for. I'm not about to go out into this world to fish for people.

Except for one thing. One thing keeps me from dismissing the fishing metaphor entirely. One... catch, if you will.

That catch is that I've been caught.

I'm caught. I hope and I pray that I won't wake up someday and discover the hook of disillusionment in my mouth or the net of despair around me, because the way that I've been caught by God feels a whole lot better than what I imagine a fish feels. Something got a hold of me at the very core of my being and won't let me go.

There is such a thing as being caught in a life of faith. That's a real thing. And if you and I can somehow find a way to convey through our lives what feels like to be wrapped up and held in the arms of the divine, we might redeem at least a piece of this metaphor after all.

To be caught up in faith is to come to the beautiful, humbling recognition that our lives are connected to everything and to everyone around us. We're all caught like this—"caught in an inescapable network of mutuality" according to Dr. King—and being caught like this not a bad thing. How do we—how do you and I—talk about and promote and practice a faith that celebrates that kind of connection? That would be real evangelism. I want to offer 3 ways.

The first involves not nets, but networks. We who are Christians must create networks that catch and support each other through life's ups and downs. These networks may be institutionalized in churches, schools, or 12-step groups, or nonprofits, or book groups, but they may just as well be informal networks of friends or neighbors—can I pick up your mail, can I watch your kids? Good networks are places where we know others and are known in turn; places where our lives matter to others; where our gifts are given for others' benefit and others' gifts received for our own. To be caught in a life of faith is to be woven into patterns of interaction and kinds of relationships where our interconnectivity as children of God is known in the flesh. In these networks, relationship is sought for itself only, because relating is human and humanizing. Being together is an intrinsic good. That's one way we can embody connection.

There is a second way that the life of faith catches us and connects us to each other—this time, it's not a net but in a web—the web of knowledge about the world in which we live. Truth is a web. It used to be that truth claims were built on foundations—things that we could say we knew for certain, and all knowledge is built upon those things. But we live now in a postmodern world, and the web has replaced the foundation as the key metaphor for how knowledge works. In a web, what we find to be true—whether it's through faith, or science, or beauty—all truth must be connected; it has to be linked to and consistent with our experience of the world and with the experience of others. The web of knowledge has no foundation, it's a constellation of ever-changing, yet perpetually sympathetic points of understanding. One of our responsibilities as Christians is to take our tradition seriously—to know our theology and Scripture, and to always be willing to put our tradition in conversation with the world around us. It is this conversation, this participation in the web of knowledge that strengthens our tradition. It shows us where and how Christians have screwed up—our patriarchy, our sexism, our complicity with economic injustice, violence, and white supremacy. When the web shows us our faults, we can repent and change. But our participation in the web of knowledge won't only show what Christianity has gotten wrong—it will also remind us of the unique strengths of our tradition: our focus of self-giving love, our sense that everyone belongs, our care for those who struggle, a capacity for humility and wonder and praise. An intact web keeps us psychically healthy—it connects our tradition's metaphysical claims about ultimate reality to the reality of empirical observation. We are caught, and held, in the web of knowledge, and in this often-confusing world, the web can harbor us from disillusionment and despair.

Finally, lest my vision for being caught in a life of faith seems too abstract, this life must include being caught and held in the loving embrace of one another. There is nothing—no experience in this world—as important as being caught in the arms of a person who loves you for you. I don't mean everybody needs to get married—although marriage can be a pretty good place for love to happen. I'm just saying that we all need to experience the sublime feeling of human intimacy. It can be with a friend or a lover or our children. The embrace is a basic authentication of our humanity; it is a kind of catching and being caught that is, paradoxically, the truest expression of our freedom in God. In a loving embrace, there is not I and It, there is I and Thou. Two subjects, each of whose desire is to love each other into freedom. When we love each other, we re-enact God's disposition toward us. We are caught—in the best kind of way.

Jesus says, “Do not be afraid to follow me. From now on you will be catching people.”

It's a difficult metaphor. Can we reject the imperative to do the catching, and yet embrace the experience of being caught? If by “being caught,” we mean caught in networks of mutuality. Caught in holistic webs of knowledge. Caught in the loving embrace of one another. *That* is a vision the Christian life that I can live with. It is, I might even say, a vision for which I am willing to be “caught alive.”