

“Catching People”  
Luke 5:1-11  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

January 26, 2025  
Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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If I told you that I’ve got two sermons that I’m going to preach to you this morning, would you get worried that we’re going to run out of time today?

Please don’t worry.

If two sermons sounds like disappointing news, the good news is that I won’t keep you any longer than if I were just preaching one sermon.

The first sermon is about our church.

In our text for today, you just heard Jesus tell Simon Peter:

“Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.”

Jesus spoke those words long ago, but I need to tell you, I feel like he is speaking them to all of us here today. For many years now—going way, way back, much earlier than when my family moved here in 2018—Westminster has been catching people.

At the stated Session meeting last Sunday, the annual statistical report was shared and approved. Now I realize that may not sound like scintillating stuff for a sermon—

the annual statistical report—

but listen for a moment to a few numbers:

Westminster’s membership now stands at 2,149.

Six years ago, that number stood at 1,804.

That means we've grown by about 350 members in six years, which is essentially like adding another small congregation to our church during that time.

In other words, **by God's grace, we're catching people.**

Every Wednesday afternoon, WPC Kids hosts up to 150 children during our It's Elementary ministry.

Every Sunday evening, parents are asked to prepare a meal for WPCYG, our youth ministry, for up to 150 teenagers.

Half of our membership is under the age of 50, and that's not counting all the hundreds of children who have yet to be confirmed as active members.

Do you see what's happening?  
**By God's grace, we are catching people.**

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All of which raises an important question:

If catching people,  
 making and shaping disciples of Jesus,  
 being part of a faith community where you can come as you are, whoever you are, and be equipped to love your neighbors more faithfully and grow in your faith more deeply...

If this is the job that God has given to us at Westminster...  
 what does that mean for our church's future?

In other words:  
**Who is God calling us to be?**

Our text for today is about the call of the first disciples.  
 But it's also about the call of these disciples.  
 And that's what I would like you to think about in the first sermon.

### **Who is God calling Westminster Presbyterian Church to be?**

In different ways, this is THE question that has guided our leadership over the past few years.

Every spring, when new elders start three years of service on the Session, we have a Session retreat.

In 2022, right on the heels of the pandemic, the Session focused on our vision, our pillars, and our goals. Do you remember what our vision, pillars, and goals are?

Vision: Open Minds Open Hearts.  
 Pillars: Hospitality, Generosity, Justice, Imagination, Joy  
 Goals: Connect, Serve, Grow

Good. Y'all have been paying attention the past few years!

At its retreat in 2023, the Session focused on our history.

At its retreat in 2024, the Session explored the question, "Who do we serve?" In other words, who are the different groups that meet within our walls, groups like NAMI and Al-anon? Who are the mission agencies that we support outside our walls—agencies like United Ministries and Thornwell and Soteria?

How many children attend our Weekday School?  
 How many are on the wait list?

(Anyone know how many children are on our Weekday School's wait list? Over 600!)

How many of God's children walk through our doors between November – February for basketball practices and games in our gym?

Who are the people we serve?

At its retreat this spring, the Session will hear from the Connect, Serve, Grow Task Force. That Task Force has been hard at work throughout the past 10 months. They have met with our staff leadership, they've met with our lay leadership, they heard from you through the survey we conducted last fall...all of it leading to the question:

**Who is God calling Westminster to be in the next 5-10 years?**

- For example, what areas of our facility need capital improvements, and how can we make those improvements during the next decade?
- Is there a new mission initiative we could start that would serve our neighbors and be hands-on, involving all generations of our church?
- With all of our growth, how can we continue to connect new members to our church, so that new friendships form and strong connections are made?
- And here's a crucial one:  
How do we appropriately staff for our growth?

You see, we're in excellent shape with our ministry staff and our program staff—I couldn't ask for more splendid colleagues to work with...at the same time, we don't have enough staff in the "behind the scenes" areas of our life together.

For example, as you well know, our administrative staff in the church office does a terrific job. But we only have TWO PEOPLE working in the main office for a church of over 2100 hundred members.

And we only have ONE PERSON on staff who takes care of all the financial matters for our church.

Those staffing numbers would be fine for a church a third of our size. But it's far from the norm when compared to other churches our size.

In addition, we only have TWO PEOPLE on staff who handle all the facility cleaning and set up and take down...and they're not here every hour that our doors are open.

What does that mean?

Well, just a few weeks ago, it was 45 minutes before a memorial service was going to begin in our sanctuary, and a terrible smell began seeping out of the choir room!

It was an electrical smell.

I didn't know if something was burning or short-circuiting or what was going on...but there we were, 45 minutes before a memorial service, and no property staff scheduled to be here.

Long story short, thank God for our Administration Committee which takes such good care of our property! I am so grateful to the tireless servants of Christ who are on that committee.

No surprise, two of them received phone calls that afternoon!

What this group does week after week behind the scenes to help keep our church property functioning and looking nice...most of us have no idea. And frankly, we have people like that, giving their time month after month on every committee of our church.

So many of you—who volunteer their time and energy and love in countless ways behind the scenes.

Look, I can't name all of you in a sermon.

But you know who you are.

And I'm saying thank you to each and every one of you in this sermon.

**We would not be where we are today without you.**

And...I'm saying one more thing:

When our church doesn't have enough facilities staff to cover the hours that our church is open, when we have the smallest office staff that I've ever seen for a church our size....AND we're continuing to grow, catching people month after month, what does all that mean?

It means that in ways that are not noticeable during Sunday morning worship, our nets are straining.

We need to keep investing in our behind-the-scenes staff, because we don't want those nets to break.

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**Who is God calling Westminster to be?**

That's the question for our first sermon today.

Here's the second question for our second sermon.

## Who is God calling you to be?

Not always an easy question to answer, I admit.

I remember hearing once about a children's sermon in which the pastor called all the kids forward for children's time.

And the pastor looked out at the children and said, "Boys and girls, what's this big, has a long furry tail, and climbs trees?"

There was silence.

Finally, one child summoned the courage to speak.

She said, "Pastor, I know I'm supposed to say Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me."<sup>1</sup>

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That kid was on to something.

One of the hardest things about call, in my experience, is recognizing Jesus.

Knowing that the voice inside of us, the impetus that's leading us down one road or another...is actually the voice of Jesus, that's hard to do.

And even when we're convinced it is Jesus, there's something inside each of us that resists it.

At least, that's the way Luke describes it.

Did you catch that?

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<sup>1</sup> As told by Tony Campolo in his sermon, "Children of the Kingdom," as it appears in *Sermons from Duke Chapel: Voices from "A Great Towering Church,"* edited by William H. Willimon, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

Peter doesn't say, yeah, Jesus called ME!  
He says, "Go away from me Lord...!"

Peter resists the call at first!  
We all have resistance, I think, to God's call...why?  
You know why.

Because we have our own plans.  
Because we like to be in control.  
And when God calls us, there is no greater reminder....that we are  
not in control.

The pastor who baptized me, the Rev. Dr. Ron Byars, once wrote:

"No one can know for sure, but I think that the...fishermen were pulled [into following Jesus]. They left everything, and followed Jesus, not to escape some misery--but because something in the call so awakened them, so stirred them, pulled them so strongly that it overcame their natural resistance."<sup>2</sup>

Do you know anything about that?

Do you know anything about a call, a voice, a love...that  
overcomes your own natural resistance, and you find yourself walking  
down a road you've never traveled before?

Not because you want to do it.  
But because you're called to do it.

Let me get at it like this.

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<sup>2</sup> From a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Ronald P. Byars, "Fishing," preached at First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI, January 26, 1997.



The late anthropologist Loren Eiseley once told the story of traveling to the beautiful Colorado Rockies. He had been commissioned by a zoo to secure certain birds and reptiles there.

He found an abandoned cabin, and knew he'd find some birds in the cabin. So, he waited for night to arrive, and he put a ladder to the wall, just below an upper shelf where the birds would sleep.

He climbed up with a flashlight,  
and his plan was to blind the birds with the flashlight,  
so that he could seize whatever was sleeping in  
the shelf.

He said his plan worked perfectly...except for one thing.  
He failed to anticipate what kind of bird he would grab.

As soon as he got up with the flashlight and grabbed at one bird, the bird's mate—there were two birds there—the bird's mate sunk its beak in his thumb and his claws into Eiseley's hand.

The birds were hawks, sparrow hawks.  
And the male was attaching itself to Dr. Eiseley so that the bird's mate would be free.

Long story short, the female escaped, but Dr. Eiseley held onto the male, carefully making his way back down the ladder, and nursing his wounded hand, he put the male into a small box.

The next morning, Dr. Eiseley got up to build a cage for this hawk, so it could be taken back to the zoo.

Eiseley writes:

“I was up early...a wind as cool as a mountain spring ran over the grass and stirred my hair. It was a fine day to be alive.

“I looked up and all around and at the hole in the cabin roof out of which the other little hawk had fled. There was no sign of her anywhere that I could see.”

Probably in another county by now, he thought.

Then Eiseley says he took the captured hawk in his hand again, but this time there was no fight.

He “could feel [the hawk’s] heart pound under the feathers...”

And then, Dr. Eiseley says, he changed his mind.

Instead of putting the hawk in its cage for the trip, Dr. Eiseley decided to let it go.

He put the hawk in the grass.

The hawk lay there a minute or so, not realizing what had happened...and then it flew away. It flew so quickly into the morning light, Eiseley could not see where he went against the brightness of the sun.

Another minute went by, a minute of absolute silence.

“Then,” he writes, “from far up somewhere a cry came ringing down. It was not the cry of the hawk I had captured...Straight out of the sun’s eye, where she must have been soaring restlessly above us for untold hours, hurtled his mate...I saw them both now. He was rising fast to meet her.

“And from far up, ringing from peak to peak of the summits over us, came a cry of...unutterable and ecstatic joy...”<sup>3</sup>

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Do you know anything about that?

About a love so powerful, that love will claim you and call you...and will overcome your resistance and get you to where you need to go?

It's the love that God has for Westminster Presbyterian Church.  
It's the love that God has for each and every one of you.

When that love comes to you, and says:  
“Don't be afraid. From now on....”

How would you finish that sentence?

(Amen.)

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<sup>3</sup> Loren Eiseley, *The Immense Journey*, New York: Random House, 1957, as told by John R. Claypool, in his sermon “The Communion of Saints,” found in *God is an Amateur*, by John R. Claypool, Cincinnati, OH: Forward Movement Publications, 1994.