

“If You Say So, Boss”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

February 6, 2022

¹Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³He 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. ⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." ⁵Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." ⁶When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷So 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. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" ⁹For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰and 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." ¹¹When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him. (Luke 5:1-11)

The early chapters of Luke focus very clearly on the subject of authority – the authority that Jesus carries in the story of the gospel and the story of the world. When Jesus is born, angels, shepherds, priests, and prophets all proclaim that this baby is uniquely special. By the age of twelve, Jesus is already standing toe to toe with the best rabbis in Jerusalem, “amazing” even the most experienced teachers of the law.¹ In Chapter 3, Jesus’ baptism brings forth an astounding vision of a descending dove and a voice from heaven booms for all to hear, “*This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*”²

In Chapter 4, Jesus is tempted by the devil himself, who promises Jesus full worldly authority, full control of all the kingdoms of the world, only to have Jesus refuse the offer, choosing the authority that comes only from God.³ Then Jesus goes to his hometown of Nazareth, where he again teaches with authority and blows the minds of everyone in the old neighborhood. Then he heads over to the Sea of Galilee, to Capernaum, where Luke 4:32 says that everyone was “*astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with **authority.***”

Just two verses later, even the demons were taking notice, saying “*I know who you are, [Jesus], the Holy One of God.*”

Word continues to spread like wildfire, until, as Luke 4:36 says, everyone was “*amazed and kept saying to one another, “What is up with this?”* That’s actually my translation of that part, but this next part is right out of the standard translation: “*with **authority and power** he commands the unclean spirits, and out they come!*”

For four chapters, Luke describes an authority in Jesus that grows and spreads, step by step, until everyone is talking about it. And I think it is notable that, up to this point, we have heard ***not one word about the disciples.*** In Mark, they show up just 15 verses in. It’s the same in the gospel of John; we meet Peter and Andrew in the first chapter. But Luke

¹ Luke 2:46-7.

² Luke 3:22.

³ Luke 4:5-8.



takes his time, and spends the better part of four whole chapters just building up the authority of Jesus.

And then, almost as an afterthought, Luke casually drops in the line, “*After leaving the synagogue he entered Simon’s house.*” In that culture of oral tradition and storytelling, the people hearing this story would have all looked at each other with confusion and said, “Simon? Who is Simon, and why is Jesus going to *his* house?”

Now, this, I think, is very much on purpose. Luke is a great storyteller, and Luke has a reason to tell the story this way. Luke has spent all of this time building up the authority of Jesus. And then, out of the blue, the story drops the Son of God into the house of a random fisherman named Simon Peter. It is as if the narrator is saying to the audience, “OK, we can all agree that we have established the authority of Jesus. Now let’s see if this guy Peter can see it... and, if so, what he is willing to do about it.”

From that point, what happens to Peter on a personal scale mirrors what Luke has been describing in the world. The first meeting between Peter and Jesus, as we are told in the gospels of Matthew and Mark, takes place on a beach by the Sea of Galilee. Peter and his brother Andrew, who is also a fisherman, are in shallow water casting a net into the sea when Jesus walks by.⁴ And, just as it was when the shepherds met the babe in Bethlehem, Peter and Andrew know instantly that Jesus was uniquely special... so special that they immediately drop their nets and leave their father behind in the boat to follow him.

We are not told how, but Jesus continues to fascinate Peter, to the point that Peter invites Jesus to his house for dinner. There, Luke tells us that Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law, who had been suffering from a high fever. Upon seeing this very personal miracle, we have to think that Jesus’ authority went even higher in Peter’s sight. Later, that evening, we are told that everyone in town started gathering around Peter’s door. With each passing minute, the authority of Jesus has to be rising in Peter’s estimation.

This background helps us to see the importance of one key word in today’s reading from Chapter 5, a word which marks the next step in this progression of Peter’s faith. Jesus is teaching a big crowd on the beach from a boat near the shore. When he finishes the lesson, he turns around and sees Peter and some other fishermen out on the lake working hard but catching nothing. “Hey, Peter,” he calls. “*Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.*” And the word I want to focus on is the one Peter uses to address Jesus. Peter responds by calling Jesus Ἐπιστάτα (*epistata*) or “Master.” According to the biblical scholar D. Mark Davis, no other gospel uses this Greek word, but Luke uses it seven times. And every time, it is spoken by a disciple in reference to Jesus. While we might think it has a connotation of master and slave, it is really more like “boss” or “superintendent.”⁵ It is an address that shows this group is already operating as a team of workers, and that the authority on that team clearly rests on the shoulders of Jesus. Jesus is “the boss.”

And Peter proves that Jesus really is the boss with what he does next. “*Master,*” he says, “*we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.*” In other words, Peter does exactly what Jesus tells him to do. And that was no light thing. Jesus, let’s remember, was NOT a fisherman. Jesus was a carpenter. A former carpenter, we should say. Peter, on the other hand, was very much a fisherman. So were all

⁴ Matthew 4:18; Mark 1:16.

⁵ D. Mark Davis, “Left Behind and Loving It,” <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/02/a-boatload-of-fish.html>

the other people in the boat with him. And they were fishing in the same waters they had fished for their whole lives – the same waters their fathers had probably fished, and their fathers before them. Some of you remember those Bo Jackson commercials from the 80's? Bo Knows Football? Bo Knows Baseball? Well, Peter knew fishing. Peter knew fish. Peter knew the Sea of Galilee. Peter ***knew fishing***.

So, let's imagine what Peter could have said... or better yet, what we would probably be tempted to say if we had been in Peter's shoes. Something to the effect of, "Are you kidding me? I've been fishing this lake since I was four years old. Just today, I fished this part of the lake for three hours before you got up, and another two hours while you were busy preaching. You're telling me to go out a little farther? Well, I was out there 4 hours ago, and then again in the last hour, and the fish aren't there. I don't know where they are, but they are not out there. You tell me to go out a little farther and try again? Well, I'm telling you that I know more about fishing than you do. And I'm tired, and I need a break, so I'm coming in."

As you know, that is ***not*** what Peter says. He may have been thinking, "This isn't going to do any good." But what he says is, "If you say so, Boss. If you say so, I will go a little farther out. If you say so, I will let down the nets one more time."

It was an amazing act of trust – to be willing to try again, even when experience and know-how told him not to... to be willing to go a little farther, even when he was tired... simply because Jesus suggested it. Something had happened to Peter since that first encounter on the beach. That had gotten his attention, and he became even more intrigued as he watched Jesus teach with authority and heal with power. And then the power came into his own house, when his mother-in-law's fever miraculously broke. In a relatively short time, the authority of Jesus in the life of Peter had grown step by step, until now, out there on the lake, Peter is acknowledging Jesus as his boss. Not in a command-and-control, "you-better-do-what-I-say-or-else" kind of way, but in the same way that effective teams have clear leaders – people who have earned and deserve the trust of the team. At some point over the previous few days Peter had decided that he would willingly take directions from Jesus Christ, even if he, acting on his own authority, would make a different choice, even when his limbs were weak and his spirit was exhausted. Peter had made the decision that he wanted to be part of Jesus' team, and that Jesus was in charge.

Now, there are some words that those of you who are parents have probably heard before. It is the response that often comes when you ask a child to do something they would rather not do... like eat their vegetables... or put their phones down... or write a note to a loved one. You ask them to do these things for good reasons, but you have probably heard the response: "Do I have to?"

In their defense, it's not just kids who say this. Adults do it to. The alarm rings on Sunday morning. Church starts in an hour or so. But it's the only morning you have to sleep in. And you work so hard during the week. Maybe you don't say it out loud, but you might think it. "Do I have to?"

Or we are at work, and a job needs doing. It's the kind of job that no one looks forward to doing, and it's not in our core job description. Sure, we could do it, but so could someone else down the hall, and we have so much on our plate. And we might not say it, but we sure are thinking it. "Do I have to?"

And the answer is no. No, we don't have to. Truth is, we can probably get away with not doing it pretty easily. No one will be surprised if we don't do it. Eventually, someone else will get it done.

But here is the thing for us in the church, and it is one of those things that make us different from everybody else. The gospels make a consistent point about what it means to be a disciple. The Bible makes it perfectly clear that every true disciple... every person who decides that faith will be more than a hobby or a side hustle... every person who hears Jesus' invitation to follow, and does in fact choose to follow him, even if it means picking up a cross of our own... each and every one of those authentic disciples of Christ finds a way to move from "Do I have to?" to "If you say so, Boss." If you call me, I will follow. If you send me, I will go.

And no one has to do that. God is not twisting anybody's arm. Peter didn't have to do what he did. And when Jesus gave him fishing advice, you have to think Peter's first thought was probably, "Do I have to?" But if Peter hadn't done it, if he chose not to go out just a little farther and toss the nets one more time, he would not have seen what God was ready to do in Peter's life – the completely unexpected and miraculous things that God was ready to do for Peter. He would have missed the sensation of realizing that, out of the blue, his nets were more full than they had ever been before. Peter would have missed that precious moment when he realized that God's promises were real.

Now, we know that Peter wasn't any more perfect than any of us. He would go on to have some spectacular failures. But in this critical moment, Peter made the choice to go from "Do I have to?" to "If you say so, Boss." And that made all the difference.

God is calling all of us in the same way. There are times in all of our lives when we face something hard, something that God is inviting us to do, but we start talking ourselves out of it. God is always inviting us to go out just a little farther, to extend just a bit more, to see what might happen. No one would be surprised if we said, "Do I really have to?" and went on another way. But it will be those who dare to answer God's call with faith and obedience who end up being truly surprised and amazed at what God can do with our humble "OK, God, if you say so."

It is if the story is saying to us, "OK, we can all agree that we have established the authority of Jesus. Now let's see if you can see it... and, if so, what you are willing to do about it."

Amen.