

“The Fatigue of Being Yourself” based on Luke 5:1-11 and Psalm 138

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on February 9, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

It was the biggest catch of their lives, and they walked away. They fished all night, putting their nets down, drawing them up again, over and over again, and they had nothing to show for it, and then this happened. When Jesus asked Simon to let his nets down, Simon doubts Jesus. He calls him “*epistata*,” meaning one who stands over, as in commander, overseer, or master. He says, “upon your word, I will let down the nets.” But this is not like the centurion who believed that Jesus could heal his servant from afar, and said, “only say the word and he will be healed.”

No, Simon’s reply is doubtful. “If you say so, I’ll do it.” And why wouldn’t he doubt? He’s the professional fisherman with a crew of professionals. He knows of Jesus as a preacher and healer, according to Luke. Simon then knows he’s no fisherman. Luke says Jesus came to Capernaum to teach in the synagogue one Sabbath, and it was quite a scene, as Jesus cast out a demon from a man there. Afterward, Jesus went over to the home of Simon. There he healed Simon’s mother-in-law of a fever, and she got up and began to serve everyone there. It seems it was still the sabbath, but apparently, she had rested enough with a fever in bed.

Word spreads, and at sunset, people start bringing people to Jesus for healing. There, presumably in the street or a field near Simon’s home, Jesus heals people, and he exorcises more demons, but then he leaves. Then he leaves and goes to a solitary place, but the crowds follow him. Jesus leaves Capernaum, going south to Judea to preach there. Simon, it seems knew of, and even encountered Jesus, but he was then distant. He disappeared and was no longer present in his life. That is, until he shows up on the lakeshore. So, Simon lets him preach from his boat, perhaps as a thank you for the healing. But Jesus’s gift, is not a gift you are meant to pay back in kind. So, Jesus gives again.

Simon’s nets enclose such a great multitude of fish, he needs help pulling it in. Remember that any crew that went out fishing was considered brave. This is because the sea was a symbol of chaos and of disorder, because it was dangerous. But now Jesus, it seems, demonstrates control over that chaos. Simon confesses, saying, “Depart from me, because I am a sinful man.” Simon surrenders by bowing a Jesus’s feet. Simon prays, because now he calls Jesus, “Lord,” an honorific title, which happens to be used in place of God’s own name. Simon confesses, surrenders and prays.

In this moment of dependence and confession, when Simon knows he is not magnificent. Simon admits his sin, but Jesus doesn’t mention it. Forgiveness is a given. Jesus says, “Do not fear. From now on, you will be capturing people.” Your translation probably rightly say “fishing” for people, but the word here is not fishing for food, but a “living catch.” And so, it was used for enthralling or captivating an audience.

Let’s look again at some key points: Simon was aware that Jesus was special. The personal benefit of the miracle that Jesus did next didn’t matter – they walked away. What mattered was that it demonstrated Jesus as having a unique kind of power. For the Jewish people, only YHWH, the Lord, could command power over nature. Simon responds not with exuberance, but with shock and repentance. He has no idea where Jesus will lead him, or if this is even true. There’s no real reason to think it will be an easy road. *Come on, this guy doesn’t even have his own boat! How successful is he?* Yet, Simon leaves everything behind and James and John come too. They just follow Jesus.

The story of Simon, who would become Peter, reflects any call story, even our own. We all go through life aware of Jesus, perhaps the most famous person to ever live. His teaching changed Western Culture from one where might always makes right, as in the Greco-Roman way, to a belief in rights, compassion, and individual freedom. But, in reality, until we follow and walk with Jesus,

we struggle to believe. This is because you can't "think" your way into a new being. We believe when we come to confession, surrender, and prayer (and thereby act into a new way of thinking).

This is the struggle we face in this post-modern age of personal and curated identities. Our culture tries to bring forth the principles, ethics, and ideas of Jesus. Some elevate one principle over others and ignore the rest. But we try to do it without him, cutting him out of the picture, or by using him as a means to gain power.

Now, what I'm about to say may excite you or it may challenge or even offend you. If it excites you, it may be because you're thinking about your enemies, or your opposite and saying, "Yeah, that applies to *them*." Don't do that. If it challenges you, or potentially offends you, it may be because you're assuming I'm talking to you, or about you. That's what I want you to do. This is not because I'm preaching to or about anyone in particular, but because it's always better for us to look internally first. We need to be offended but also comforted because we need to truly confess to God, rather than justify ourselves, by our own excuses.

The Danish theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said of his native country, that there were in his lifetime of the early 1800s, no "true Christians" in Denmark. He was often hyperbolic, making exaggerations to prove his point. I will not say there are no true Christians in America. I believe we are many, but I will say that all of us, including and perhaps especially me, face challenges.

I believe our faith is undermined by the culture we live in. Ironically, I also believe that very culture has evolved to be the way it is, largely because of the influence of Christianity. This is why it is so dangerous to us. We've used the freedom to accept Christ, but then replaced callings with destiny, We've replaced the guilt and justice given by God, with shame and honor, decided by us, by ourselves. Every one of us is subject to the weight of our identities, judgement and shame, from within.

We live in a world that tells us that we can be anything we want to be, if we just work for it. You could do it. Anything. How many graduation ceremonies include the nonsense: "*Just be yourself,*" "*trust in yourself*" or "*find yourself.*" We listen to these platitudes and encourage our young people to "*look to your own potential.*" We do this instead of embracing them for who they are, right now.

We think that this sounds like freedom – No one can tell you what you should do with your life! No, you should live life thinking only of the things you could do, what you're capable of doing and find affirmation. You have so much potential, we say, it's like you're destined to do great things. You are told to take heroic actions to be a self-made person, independent to do the impossible, like picking yourself up by your bootstraps. Or told to find your inner genius – that special thing that makes you, you – your true self, in order to shine when you live into it.

Both of these, as theologian Andrew Root, points out, are forms of secular mysticism that can malform us. This is because both of these depend on affirmation, not from a God who judges by standards and still loves us, but ourselves and our communities who judge our performance on shifting measures of what they think makes us authentic, here and now.

This is the foundation of the achievement society and these secular mysticisms. They have no ability to help us cope with the guilt and shame we feel when judging ourselves. How often do we say, "I'm my own worst critic"? The standard of achievement has become "likes" or "affirmations." We may feel we have to take heroic action to make our point for our cause, but if it falls flat, without affirmation and without making change, we feel shame, because it feels like we have not achieved what we are capable of, or what we are supposed to achieve.

This happens on social media now and in real life as well. We cut out or call out those who oppose us, and condense our followers and friends, to only those who think like we do. Likewise, we put ourselves out there, curating ourselves carefully to reveal who we think we are, and if it is not received and affirmed by others as genuine, we feel shame and hurt. Once again, we call out those who would hurt us by not embracing our true self as we see it. We cut out those who do the same, condensing the world we live in.

We want to find our affirmation bubble – those who say, *“It’s all ok! You do you! You’re the best and so brave.”* We look for this rather than finding people who would say no, challenge us, and make us better without the need for social achievement. If we offend the sensibility of another’s true identity, their hurt and shame might cancel us, just as we canceled others, leaving us alone.

In declaring the death of God, Friedrich Nietzsche warned that this would be the result. When he applauded the end of morality, and the rise of the super man in its place, he acknowledged that the will to power would leave many feeling unmoored, without a firm ground to stand on, leaving culture to play the role of God. He favored the idea that human beings must take heroic action and let the chips fall where they may.

Likewise, Karl Marx said that religion’s only positive function was to allow people to feel good about themselves, believing that an all-powerful God judged them, forgave them and would support them. Marx called religion an “opiate” and sought to replace religion, by making all things political instead. Sound familiar? In that way, we are all Marxists today because everything in life has become political.

The result is what the French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg called “the fatigue of being yourself.” He argued in the late 1990s that our increasing emphasis on individuality, and our drive toward an achievement-based assessment of self-worth was causing the rise of depression in Western nations. He said this rise would only become even more steep as this continues. When he wrote his book, depression had doubled in 25 years from the 1970s to the late 1990s from about 3% to nearly 6% of all Western nations, meaning people in North America and Europe.

His book was translated and re-published in English in 2009 after the smart phone and social media arrived, and as predicted, these things that center on individuality and social affirmation, correlate with even greater depression rates. In 2023, 25 years after he first published, nearly 18% of Americans reported that they are dealing with the symptoms of depression. That represents a three-fold increase in the next 25 years. It’s hard to be ourselves. We are our worst critics, and we seek affirmation wherever we can get it. We seek it in the arms of a fickle mob that is always changing, rather than in the arms of a loving God who judges and forgives.

Beloved, the secular mysticisms of today want us to box up and contain God. They tell us God is found in God’s affirmation of our heroic action, especially in defense of our faith. Or we are told God is in God’s affirmation of us discovering who or what we could be. God becomes distant, wanting us to be generally good people, but God only intervenes to be therapeutic and make us feel good, by which we prove whether we are actually a good person. God is reduced to a tool to help us feel genuine and authentic, whether that be as a hero, or an inner genius.

Beloved, let me tell you that God cannot be put in a box – God is God, and we are not. That needs to be a comfort. We are called by God, just as Simon Peter was, to recognize the good news in Jesus. He is the embodiment or incarnation of God in our flesh, born a baby. True humility is not self-deprecation, and it is not found in comparing ourselves to others. We are not humble when we deny our talents and abilities, or when we say, “She’s just so much better than me at this.”

No, we are humble when we let ourselves depend on others and let others depend on us because we follow through. I struggle with this – a lot. It's hard for me to accept help. I have to choose this. God being born a baby is ultimate humility. Here is the maker of all things born a mortal being, needing to be raised, nursed, fed and cleaned by Mary and Joseph.

God put God's own self and divine plan in the hands of an ostracized teenage mom, who had to run to Egypt at one point just to survive and comes home to people no doubt murmuring and whispering about rumors of infidelity. She held the life of Jesus in her hands. What's more, in Jesus, the eternal Son of God lived in all of our limits. He was hungry, tired, he ate and had to take bathroom breaks. All of it. He wept and felt sorrow. He had to manage every emotion, even anger at injustice and the fear of going to his own death. And yet, he endured the shame of a Roman cross for us. He died that most wretched death of a slave, only to rise again for us, defeating death, and forgiving sin by his blood.

In our Psalm, the writer says to the Lord, "I am made to give thanks to you with all my heart." Your bible likely has it just as, "I give thanks to you with all my heart." But this is a causative verb (Hiphil) in Hebrew. It means I am made to and that is not that the writer was created to give thanks, but the writer is caused by God to give thanks to God wholeheartedly. Why? Because in the day the Psalmist called out, God answered. God made the writer bold, not the self's heroic action. God made them strong in their soul, or whole being, and it was not by a self-discovery of inner genius.

The Lord is exalted – the Lord is the higher power – but looks upon the humble, the lowly. The Lord looks upon those who depend on God, depend on others, and not their own pride. This is who God is closest to, but those who do not depend, who are already exalted, are distant from God.

Beloved, philosophers from the last 350 years, whether you have read them or not, have influenced all to be in a situation where we marginalize God. This is not a "woe is Christians" thing, but a reality in the church of every denomination as well. This is because we want to wrestle from God the power of judgement and give it to ourselves. After all, we think, *"Wouldn't this destroy guilt once and for all? What do we have to be guilty of if I'm the one in control? We can achieve our own magnificence."* But life is messy and hard. We fail. Heavy is the head that wears that crown.

Beloved, this is a burden too heavy for us to bear on our own, and too delicate to leave for society to do for us. The Christian journey tells us that we are more than what we achieve in our lives. Simon failed to catch a single fish that night, even though he was a professional. He was no scholar. He was nothing special in the eyes of the world. Yet, Jesus called him, told him he would captivate people. Time and time again, Simon Peter failed, but Jesus didn't. Jesus forgave him and told him, "Feed my sheep."

Beloved, you are not defined by what you could be, your heroic action, or your inner genius. You are defined by a loving God who expects your love, and expects for you to love your neighbor. You will fail at times, but the great thing is that God pursues you always in love to forgive your failures. You do not need the affirmation of others nor certain achievements. We do not need to replace God and judge ourselves. It just doesn't work. This is what causes the fatigue of being ourselves, always adding more and more and more to our lives.

Rather, to be in Christ, as Simon shows us, comes by confession, surrender and prayer. It means you know that you are not magnificent, and you do not have to become magnificent. You need only to depend on God.

Young people, I need you to wake up now and pay attention and know this. If I'm honest, there's a lot you have to ignore in school, life, and the culture – everywhere you go. God loves you for exactly

for who you are right now. You do not have to suddenly “become yourself” and “be yourself. You are yourself. You do not need to “trust in yourself.” You can trust in God. You can be confident and trust that God has given what you need to accomplish or learn something when you depend on God. You do not need to “find yourself.” God has found you and loves you.

Yes, God will work in you to make you more like Christ. Be open to this. But this only means that you do not need social affirmation on your journey. You don’t need social media and friend groups to give you “likes” to tell you how great you’re progressing or how brave you are. You matter way more than they can tell you. The one who created all things, knows you and loves you, and wants the best for you, even if sometimes that means saying “no” to you.

We are all called to respond to God’s action and God’s love. We respond, we do some good, we fail, and God will forgive us and be with us. Do not be wearied by the judgement of this world. Do not reject the judgement of God. Take it seriously, because the great thing is what Paul said, “Who is in a position to condemn? None but Christ. Christ died for us. Christ was raised for us. Christ prays for us.”

So, rise up, and be comforted, and let us live like Christ. Yes, we’ll fail time and time again, but time and time again we must have the humility to turn back to God for forgiveness. We need the humility to depend on God and to depend on others, then have the self-giving love to help others, as we allow them and God to help us too. Amen.