

Reading from the Gospels: Luke 5:1-11

Being Assertive

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Some of the people I have admired the most in my life are probably considered by many as being pushy ... over-assertive ... or a little too aggressive in getting they want. Actually, I'm probably just a bit envious of their abilities ... because they seem to be able to accomplish what they set out to do ... and nothing is going to stop them from doing it.

One such person was a man known as Dr. Mont by the people in the little town I grew up in. Dr. Mont was the pastor of the Presbyterian Church for 40 years. Under his leadership led that little congregation grew to become a formidable mission church there in North Florida. When he retired, he kept right on being Dr. Mont ... and even though I wasn't Presbyterian at that time, his life intersected with mine through the Boy Scouts. His church sponsored my troop ... and he was always involved in Scouting.

I'm probably lucky to be alive after hanging on for dear life in the back of an old trailer with four other Scouts as the 85-year-old retired Dr. Mont wove through traffic. It was amazing ... like Moses parting the sea ... other drivers would see him coming and just pull over to the side of the road.

But I admired him. He was a no-nonsense kind of man ... if there was a job to do ... then he got it done ... one way or the other. One time he walked into the local hardware store and asked the owner to cut a piece of glass for a window. The owner replied, "Dr. Mont, we don't cut glass anymore." Dr. Mont just smiled and answered ... "That's good ... I'll pick it up in an hour." And he did.

I always wondered if he just faked that slight deafness ... for his advantage. Sometimes being a little assertive gets results.

In our reading this morning from the Gospels, we hear about someone else I greatly admire. Yes ... at times he was a bit pushy and over-assertive ... but he, too, liked to get things done. And he did ... Particularly one day when he steps into a boat on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Our Gospel lesson is from Luke, chapter 5, verses 1-11. I will be reading from Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*. Listen for the Word of our Lord ... see what our pushy Savior might do with your life.

1 Once when he was standing on the shore of Lake Gennesaret, the crowd was pushing in on him to better hear the Word of God.

2 He noticed two boats tied up. The fishermen had just left them and were out scrubbing their nets.

3 He climbed into the boat that was Simon's and asked him to put out a little from the shore.

Sitting there, using the boat for a pulpit, he taught the crowd.

4 When he finished teaching, he said to Simon, "Push out into deep water and let your nets out for a catch."

5 Simon said, "Master, we've been fishing hard all night and haven't caught even a minnow. But if you say so, I'll let out the nets."

6 It was no sooner said than done - a huge haul of fish, straining the nets past capacity.

7 They waved to their partners in the other boat to come help them. They filled both boats, nearly swamping them with the catch.

8 Simon Peter, when he saw it, fell to his knees before Jesus. "Master, leave. I'm a sinner and can't handle this holiness. Leave me to myself." **9** When they pulled in that catch of fish, awe overwhelmed Simon and everyone with him.

10 It was the same with James and John, Zebedee's sons, coworkers with Simon. Jesus said to Simon, "There is nothing to fear. From now on you'll be fishing for men and women."

11 They pulled their boats up on the beach, left them, nets and all, and followed him.

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

I can't be that assertive. If I see a boat on the edge of the water ... I'm not just going to walk over to it and climb in. First of all ... that's not good manners. Didn't Mary teach Jesus to ask first? And secondly ... I'd be afraid of what would happen to me if I just invaded the space of a fisherman.

Those guys are big ... with big arm muscles ... and with big tempers to throw any land-lubber like me into the sea. But Jesus doesn't seem to mind. Here he is at the edge of this huge lake ... the Sea of Galilee ... and the surging crowd is beginning to push him into the sea. So he takes matters into his own hands ... and he gets into Simon Peter's boat ... and then ... also in his assertive way ... Jesus asks him to push him out a little ways so he can speak to the people.

I wonder what Simon Peter thinks? "Do I know you?!"!?" And yet ... he does it. Maybe while he was mending his nets on the shore ... he was also listening. And the words of Jesus began to settle into his heart ... maybe those words planted some seeds. And you know they did ... Peter became the rock on which Christ founded his church.

Jesus walked into his life and turned the world upside down. Jesus is like that. Sometimes he calls people ... and they respond. But sometimes he's not going to sit back and wait on you to come to him. He's going to push his way into your life ... he's going to get into your boat and start asking you to do things ... things you have probably never done before. And that boat will take you on a

journey ... it will sail you through some stormy seas ... as well as through some balmy days ... from one place to the next ... as the wind ... the Spirit of God ... moves you through your life ... and as you do ... the will of God will lead you.

I met man in Israel ... a holy man of Galilee ... who is on such a journey. His name is Elias Chacour. He is the archbishop of Galilee of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church in Palestine. He is also a Palestinian Christian born in a tiny village in Israel. But in 1949, after the state of Israel had been founded ... he and his family and all the other villagers were forcefully evicted from their homes ... and forced to go live elsewhere.

Thousands of Palestinians were killed and nearly one million were forced to live in refugee camps. Can you imagine ... refugees in your own homeland? The stigma of that time has had long and terrible consequences to this very day. Chacour could have fought back ... he could have joined one of the many Palestinian groups that have sworn to destroy the Jewish state of Israel. But that didn't happen.

That's because another man of Galilee stepped into Elias Chacour's life ... Jesus stepped into his boat ... and changed the world forever. Chacour's parents were devout Christians ... they taught their son well ... and of all the Bible stories that he heard growing up, the words of scripture that took root were the Beatitudes spoken by Jesus there on the Sea of Galilee.

You've probably heard those words of scripture. . . "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth . . ." The one that took root in Chacour's heart was "Blessed are the peacemakers ... for they will be called children of God." And this child of God ... this Palestinian Christian ... has become a blessed peacemaker in a land that knows little about peace.

And like Dr. Mont ... and like Jesus ... Elias Chacour can be pretty assertive ... pushy when necessary. In a world where Palestinian Muslims, Jews and Christians are not known to mix together ... or even allowed ... Elias built a school ... a school for all children in Palestine ... Muslim, Jew and Christian. He believes ... with all of his heart ... that the only way peace will ever be achieved in Israel ... will be through the efforts of the children ... children who learn to live, play and love each other ... and then grow up to change their world.

Even as the Israeli government continues to build walls around the Palestinians ... his reaction is not to tear them down, but to build bridges over them ... bridges of friendship and peace. But Elias Chacour is not pushover ... not by a long shot. Back in the early 1990s, he needed another building permit from the Israeli government for his school. But, as has been the case over and over, it was denied.

The government has other ideas about how to enforce peace in Israel ... so Chacour's not all that popular with them. He's spent a lot of time in Israeli courts trying to get many building permits approved. This time, however, he tried a new approach. "If you need something approved in Jerusalem ... he said ... then you go to Washington." And he did.

He got on a plane and flew to our nation's capital. No one knew he was coming. And believe it or not ... he took a cab to the residence of James Baker III, the secretary of state for the first

President Bush, walked up to the door and knocked. Baker's wife, Susan, actually opened the door. She had been expecting a group of women who were coming to her home for Bible study. Chacour was dressed in his religious garb ... and she actually ... hesitantly ... invited him in.

They spoke in the kitchen ... she said that her husband was not home ... and that he would have to leave because the women were coming. He asked her what they were studying. She said the Beatitudes.

Guess who ended teaching the women's bible study on the Beatitudes for the next two hours? Is God amazing or what? Chacour did get to talk to James Baker III... and Susan and James Baker and Elias Chacour became prayer partners ... a relationship that continues to this very day.

But that wasn't the reason Chacour had gone to Washington in the first place. He still needed his building permit. And as it turns out, on Baker's next trip to Jerusalem ... the secretary of state informs the prime minister of Israel that he will not leave his office until he leaves with a building permit in his hand. And he does ... and the building was built ... and the dream of peace lives on.

Blessed are the peacemakers ... for they will be called the children of God.

What about us ... the people of Columbia Presbyterian Church? Is Jesus sitting in our boat ... leading us ... guiding us through the stormy and calm waters in our journey together? Do we trust Jesus Christ enough to do that? Or are we a church that stays beached on the shore until there is enough money in the bank and the sailing conditions are just right before we risk venturing out into the sea?

Your former pastor, Joan Gray, talks about those two kinds of churches in her recently published book, *Spiritual Leadership for Church Officers*. She writes that there are two kinds of churches ... rowboat churches and sailboat churches. A rowboat church is one that is dominated by the attitude of a congregation that is either "We can do this" or "We can't do this" ... based solely on what resources and volunteers are available to them now.

"In contrast," Joan writes, "the dominant attitude in a sailboat church is that *God can do more than we can ask or imagine* ... they look on church as a continuing adventure with a God who leads and empowers them to do more than they could ever have dreamed."

I believe with all my heart that Jesus has stepped into the S.S. Columbia ... he is in our little church boat. The question then becomes ... are we going to row that boat ... only allowing it to go where we want it to go ... which will probably be very close to shore ... or are we going to hoist the sail and follow the Spirit's leading ... even if our journey takes us far out to sea ... into unchartered waters.

In other words ... whom do we trust? Whom do we follow? Our fears ... or Jesus Christ? I pray we will choose to follow Christ ... and the leading of God's Spirit. And I can tell you ... it will be the adventure of a lifetime.

And what about you ... has Jesus stepped into your boat and is telling you to do something with your life ... to come with him ... to follow him ... to leave something behind and trust that he will lead you?

I believe so ... that's the kind of God we worship. A God who walks into our lives and turns the whole world upside down ... a God who meets us here at this table to remind us over and over about the powerful story of the Creator God ... Father, Son and Holy Spirit ... who is alive and active in this world ... changing one life at a time ... building the Kingdom of God. Your life ... your life in Jesus Christ ... filled with the Spirit ... will do more than you will ever imagine ... just ask that little refugee Palestinian boy who met a Man of Galilee ... and then watch Christ step into your little boat ... and see where he takes you.

Let us pray:

Lord, You have come up to the lakeshore,

Looking neither for wise nor for wealthy,

You only wanted that I should follow.

O Lord, with Your eyes You have searched me,

And, while smiling, have called out my name.

Now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me,

Now with You, I will seek other seas.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.