



## STEP ONE

# Surrender Your Nets

**A**s he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of [men].” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there he saw two other brothers, James, son of Zebedee and his brother, John, in the boat with their father, Zebedee, mending their nets and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Matthew 4:18–22

## Imagine and Reflect

Who are these men who spend their lives fishing,  
Rough and smelly,  
Always tired from battling the sea?  
Experts they are at catching fish,  
Providing for their families,  
Searching the sea for what avoids being found.  
The sea is all they know.  
This casting of nets is what they do best.  
It forms their identities; it is their comfort.  
But when the stranger calls them  
To walk, without fear, into His embrace,  
They leave their nets, change their hearts,  
And enter new waters teeming with those waiting to be  
found.

## Fishing in the Everydayness of Life

Christians have heard this scripture about “fishing for men” since childhood. The picturesque scene appeals to our imaginations. Traditionally, this passage was used to support the teaching that the Twelve were lowly and humble men whom Jesus called to be his apostles and, thus, leaders of his Church. That teaching emphasized their leadership and the ultimate cultic priesthood that evolved historically. But is that all there is to the story? What does that story say to us as twenty-first-century men and women?

As I mentioned in the introduction, this book was written to assist us in connecting scripture to our lives, offering a way to recognize and answer our own call to follow Christ. Now, in this first chapter, as we begin to engage the invitation given to

the fishermen by Jesus, we realize that their call is directed at our own lives as well. As those baptized into the life of Christ, the waters we are called to fish are found in our everyday circumstances. It is here that the “fish” wait to be found by Christ, through us. What does it mean to become “fishers of men”? In a faith sense, becoming a “fisherman” is akin to proclaiming the good news, witnessing by word and example that Christ is our Savior. The Great Commission to “go and make disciples” is what we are called, by baptism, to do. We disciples are sent to call others, to make new disciples.

However, before we can accept Christ’s invitation to follow him and evangelize, we have to understand what it means. The journey through this book offers clues to harnessing spiritual wisdom so that we can accomplish the task of witnessing to our faith. Our baptismal calling, the words of scripture, and the life of the Church all equip us to become and make disciples using our own rod of faith and net of good works.

### *Entering the Scripture Story:*

#### *Ordinary People*

As we imagine Matthew’s seaside account of the call of the fishermen, we see that the fishermen were ordinary people. Like us, they went about their daily task of earning a living. They also share several characteristics with us: their lives depend on their best efforts; they work hard both alone and together with others; they understand their environment and how it affects their goals; they have courage and take risks; and finally, they use the resources at their disposal to accomplish the day’s work. Each of these characteristics deserves additional reflection as we deepen our appreciation of how these aspects of their lives apply to our own lives and relationships with Christ.

**These are not wealthy men or people of influence**

Our fishermen lived in first-century Palestine. They come from families who have worked the sea, farmed, or been craftsmen for generations. They take pride in doing their trade well. Calling them ordinary might be misleading because it could be interpreted to mean that what they do isn't important or that who they are and what they have to offer isn't unique or significant enough. But only a foolish person would dismiss those who are considered ordinary. Wasn't it the Son of God who was born in an ordinary stable, to an ordinary man and woman?

We live in a society that elevates wealth, prestige, popularity, and public figures to such a degree that those not singled out might see their lives as less valuable or less important. Perhaps, like me, you have felt this way at times. By choosing ordinary people, Christ shows us that every life can be used to witness to him and to change the world.

**They are laborers**

These men support their families by the sweat of their brows, and their hard work is marked by the calluses on their hands, by what they catch and sell each day. If they don't work, they don't eat, nor do their families. The family is one of the four cornerstones of Jewish life, and no good Jew would ignore his responsibilities to his family. Each day was a day to wrestle with survival, and it is in this struggle to hold fast to our beliefs, traditions, and values in the face of constant difficulties that the uniqueness and sacredness of the ordinary manifests itself.

When I walked near the Sea of Galilee, I was touched by the realization that on that same shore Jesus strolled in search of companions to walk with him as his disciples. It dawned on me that where God calls me to be is right where I am, doing

those things that I am gifted to do and trying to be faithful to the relationships that are part of my life. Our work, our families, and our values are not trivial appendages to some greater call. They are the sacred environments in which we are meant to meet Christ and to learn the purpose of our lives.

### **Fishermen understand their environment**

Peter and the others knew which fish were best to catch in which season, whether the skies spoke of safety or peril, how best to work together to enhance the total fish take, and who in the village would buy their catch. They believed that God, the giver of all good things, was with them. They lived by the sea and took sustenance from its depths for all of their lives. Their history with the sea and with God taught them that God provides if they are willing to do their part, to do what is necessary to find and catch the fish. Their hope for the future was colored by their memory of God's providence in the past. They went out in safe or dangerous weather because experience taught them that different circumstances demand different approaches and in every situation they were in God's care. These attitudes are not unique to these particular fishermen; they are attitudes that form their whole culture and permeate the world in which they live. These values are rooted in the lived faith of their religion and their ancestors.

We each live in a set of unique circumstances that include urban, suburban, and rural elements; differing ethnic and religious backgrounds; a distinctive set of family of origin traditions, expectations, and experiences; and a particular way of seeing and understanding the world. This truth comes home to me whenever I give a talk in any part of the country. After the introductions, I ask if anyone in the audience has any connection to western New York. Inevitably, someone does, and we

joke about the idiosyncratic memories we share. I immediately feel at home, and my new friends always come up afterward to share with “one of their own.” Our environments have formed who we are and how we view the world, and through them, Christ seeks us out and issues our call.

### **Fishermen take risks**

They aren't scared off by a little rain. They go out into the deep of the sea, beyond what their natural fears and caution might indicate is best, in order to find a catch that makes their labors meaningful. They are not reckless—but they are courageous, realizing that if they allow their fears to guide their judgment, nothing of worth will be accomplished. The support they give each other minimizes what might make an individual man fearful. Together, they have learned that they need each other and can depend on each other. They know and believe what God taught in the Torah: be not afraid.

So often fear is the reason we don't step out to achieve the purpose of our lives. We fear failure, criticism, rejection, and so much more. When I first started writing for publication, I encountered this fear, and for quite some time I hesitated to show anyone my work. Yet, like the fishermen, eventually I had to make a choice to step out of my zone of comfort. Those who follow Christ are called to make a difference in the world. We do not have the luxury of giving in to our fears. As did the fishermen, we can choose to go beyond our fears in order to learn and fulfill the purpose for which God placed us on this earth.

### **Fishermen are adept at using the tools of their trade**

Every first-time fisherman starts with a simple fishing pole, and I imagine our scriptural fishermen were no different. However, born into this tradition, they quickly learned that

a single fishing line needed to give way to a net because the sea in which they fished was too quickly deep and too wildly unpredictable to use only a single fish line. Nets bring a larger catch in a shorter period of time. While the nets are unwieldy for solitary fishing, a team of men can handle both the boat and the nets with success and safety. Their teamwork in the past taught them the value of relying on each other and on each one's abilities to achieve the desired results.

The nets work for the men, but the men take care of their nets, as James and John were doing when Jesus came. On off days, rainy days, and days when the sea is too dangerous, the fishermen tend to their nets, mending those that are torn, lengthening and strengthening where needed, and examining each and every link to be sure that, when the catch is ready, so are the nets. They also dispose of those nets that no longer are helpful to them, those that are torn beyond repair or weakened to the point of danger. They are wise in discerning which nets to use and when a net is no longer helpful.

Just as we do spring cleaning and sort what is no longer of use, following Christ involves a regular appraisal of what is helping or hindering our spiritual journey. Baptism is only the beginning of the real work of being a disciple. It takes a lifetime to realize how to integrate what we believe with what we do, and how to maintain a spiritual relationship with Christ that consistently is seen in the choices we make and the lives we live.

Like the fishermen called from their nets to follow Christ, we, too, don't always recognize him as he first approaches. He looks like everyone else, and we meet him within the circumstances we have come to believe are "ordinary." There are no trumpets sounding or colors flashing as Christ approaches, and yet, our hearts know that something is different. What are the signs of this difference?

When Christ is present, we recognize a desire to reach out to help someone; we experience a sense of guilt for making choices that are neither healthy nor in sync with our best selves; and we are aware of a yearning for inner peace and a willingness to forgive. These, and others, are signs of Christ's call to become like him, and like the fishermen, intuitively we realize that in order to answer something will need to change. As we continue to enter this vocational story and to imagine it from the perspective of the encounter between Jesus and the fishermen, we'll learn more of what this change, this conversion, will involve.

*Listening From the Heart:  
The Beginning of Conversion*

In the introduction, I mentioned the Church's rich tradition of using an imaginative approach to reflecting on scripture. Here we begin that process. I invite you to let your mind rest awhile and to allow your imagination to see the vast sea, the men at work with their nets; to smell the ocean and the fish; to visualize the scene; and to allow yourself to enter it as I guide you along.

These are real people. What might they have been thinking and feeling? We are given only a Spartan glimpse in the scripture passage. Surely more happened. What might it have been like? What can we learn about how God works in our own lives, not just in the lives of these scriptural characters? Enter with trust that the Spirit is guiding us into deeper relationship with Christ as has happened throughout history when men and women of faith have wrestled with how to understand the meaning of the sacred story for their own lives.



## *The Call*

As we enter the story of the call of the first disciples, visualize a man walking along the seashore who stops to notice the teamwork, strength, and energy of a group of fishermen, and their dedication to what they are about. While still distant, he sees their easy camaraderie and relaxed body language, the way they joke and call to each other as they work. He is impressed with them—not only because of what he can see on the outside but also for what he senses on the inside.

He is alone, a carpenter who works for his daily bread using his hands. He is beginning a new life of walking the land, spreading the message of a loving God that is carved on his heart. It is what he is called to do; his life's purpose. Though the sea is not his natural environment, he identifies with these men because of their shared experience of manual work and their common faith. He recognizes the value that hardiness, simplicity, and commitment to their jobs holds, because his own father was a carpenter—a working man—and his mother labored over her home and family. He identifies with the commonness of their daily lives because his hometown of Nazareth was just a little plot of land where the pace was determined by the routines of daily life that shaped the hours and gave form to relationships. Yes, he identifies with these fishermen, and as he walks toward them, they look up from their nets and follow his approach. He is a stranger, after all, yet there is something about him that attracts their attention and draws them to him—a connection they feel but cannot explain.

As he nears, he enters into conversation with them, asking about their catch, their families, and their hopes and dreams for the future. At first reluctant to distract themselves from the day's work, they finally respond. There is a quality of attentiveness and respect in this man that compels them to engage him.