

February 9, Epiphany 5C (Luke 5:1-11)

## **Was I wrong to preach that Jesus wrecks our lives?**

by [Diane Roth](#) in the [February 2025](#) issue

Published on February 3, 2025

Harold was a stubborn Finn. He said so himself. He walked permanently stooped over, said C. S. Lewis was his favorite theologian, and was steadfast in his presence and participation in the Saturday morning men's Bible study. I can still see where he and his wife, Alice, sat in the church—lectern side, about halfway back, on the far aisle to accommodate her wheelchair.

I think it was at the Saturday morning men's breakfast. We were eating oatmeal or scrambled eggs and working through the Bible passage, and I mentioned my sermon for the next day, which was on this Sunday's gospel text, Luke's version of the call of the four fishermen. I thought I had a clever sermon title: "How Jesus Wrecks Our Lives." I had grown up with this Bible story, always with the emphasis on the invitation, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people!" But I had only recently noticed these details: when Jesus gives the abundant catch of fish, Simon and Andrew's boat begins sinking, and their nets are so full that they are tearing apart. It struck me that the miracle has a dark side. Jesus gives amazing abundance but also wrecks the things they use to make a living, even to live.

I had a sudden insight. Jesus was no "your best life now" Messiah. Jesus wrecks Simon. He shows him that the things he has always counted on can break, sink, tear, fall away. I even started looking at the miracle of the abundant fish in a different way. Sure, it is an amazing catch, but do Simon and Andrew really need all that fish? They live day to day; they can't put the fish in the bank.

I should also say that I simply like clever titles. But when Harold saw this one, he argued strenuously against it. Jesus does not wreck our lives, he said. He saves us. He makes our lives better. I thought to myself, *Well, there goes another theologian of glory* and kept the title. In some way, I still stand by that position now.

And yet, later on—much later, I'll admit—I thought more about Harold and his objections. The longer I served as pastor the more I learned about his life. I knew that his wife was confined to a wheelchair, but I learned that she had been confined to that wheelchair for most of their marriage. Alice had had polio, and her condition was due to something called post-polio syndrome. I knew that he walked permanently stooped over, but it took me a while to realize that this was because of all of the years of lifting her in and out of the wheelchair. He carried her—and not just for worship, but for the plays and concerts that they attended together.

Even later I learned something else: that he gave up a career as a university professor to take on a corporate position. He needed the larger salary in order to care for his wife.

I suppose, using my own reasoning, you could say that Alice wrecked Harold's life. But Harold would never say that. He would say that she made his life better—that he was living his best life, despite the dreams that were left behind. He had many years to consider it.

I wonder how Simon, Andrew, James, and John would feel about my clever sermon title. They gave up everything to follow Jesus, although their "everything" might not seem like much to us. A couple of boats and some nets. But also their families and the only way of life they knew. And at least at first, they were probably dreaming about Jesus restoring the kingdom to Israel and what that glory would be like. Then came his unimaginable crucifixion and even more unimaginable resurrection.

Somehow I don't think they would have said that Jesus wrecked their lives. Even though James was martyred early and Peter was crucified head down. I think they would have said, like Harold, that Jesus made their lives better. In fact, *better* seems to be too tame a word. I am not sure what word to use instead.

But it makes me wonder how we might come to see life this way, to see Jesus this way. With Simon, it has to do with holiness. "Go away from me, for I am a sinful man," he says to Jesus. But Jesus doesn't go away.

For Harold, it was something else. It was love. It was his love for his wife, and her love for him, that made him see differently. What mattered was being together. He was saved, not wrecked.

Holiness and love. I have always thought they were two different things. But, as in so many other things, perhaps I am wrong.