

Leaving everything and letting down

Reflection on Florence Nightingale

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When Jesus had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So 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. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and 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.” When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him. - Luke 5:4-11

Scripture texts for saints’ commemorations are chosen, of course, on the basis of some correspondence with the saint in question. Let me suggest two connections between the text from Luke that we just heard and the faith and witness of Florence Nightingale.

The last line of the gospel provides what may be the most obvious point of contact: “*They left everything and followed him.*” Florence Nightingale was born into and raised in aristocratic privilege. By her world’s standards, she had it made. Her position and path were settled. But at age 17, she had a vision from God about serving the world as a nurse, an inconceivable step-down for someone of her class. Her determination to follow that vision led to years of tears in her family, with her mother in particular. Oh, and one particular suitor, a fine match, who gave up after nine years. Both her family and her suitor might have said, with some bitterness, that Florence Nightingale ‘*left everything—including them!—and followed Jesus ...*’

Nursing changed greatly during the course of Nightingale’s life, largely due to *her* – her hunger for knowledge, her advocacy for women and for the dignity of nursing as a vocation, her pioneering work in statistics, and more. Some of her most formative study was not done in a classroom or library but on the battlefields of the Crimean War – 900,000 troops from a dozen countries, 200,000 casualties and as many injured. You could say that she went fishing, but not for just anyone, rather for the wounded in body, mind and spirit, and as well for women who would become colleagues in educated, compassionate, dignified care.

You and I imagine our time now is perilous, and so it is. But in the course of our human history more times are perilous than stable. Florence Nightingale reminds me of those who, amidst uncertainty, adapt, raise banners, take risks and summon good from others to serve the good of all. Who among us will be so remembered: for who we now are, in faith, in our own time of trial?

If we had a chance to ask Florence Nightingale to comment on the gospel text that would be read today, she may have resisted drawing attention to *leaving everything and following Jesus*. I wonder if, instead, she might reflect on the moment when Jesus tells the disciples to ‘*put out into the deep water.*’ The image and a command has often been understood both literally and

as a perennial invitation to all with regard to the inner life of prayer. I mentioned already Florence Nightingale's mystical vision at age 17, and there were apparently others.

I'm inclined to think, and I wonder if you may be as well, that mystics are few and far between, that God makes only one in a million, that the deep waters are off limits to most of us. But what if that big catch of fish is down in the deep waters of the souls of all of us? I can't say for sure; I don't know; but if so: what prevents us from fishing there? I'm sure between us, we could come up with a long list of reasons: distractions, embarrassments, our unwillingness to go against the tide of frenzied doing, our fears, or the lack of examples around us. What do you hear when Jesus says to you, "*Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.*"

In the case of Florence Nightingale, we surmise that at least some of the remarkable decisions and commitments of her life arose from her knowing when and where and how to let down the nets of her inquiry and contemplation to the catch of the Spirit. I wonder how many of us can say that who we are today, and who we aspire to be, and the things for which we will be remembered, arise from that same awareness of the deep and the same obedience to the word of Jesus in putting our nets down there. *Amen.*