

Simon Says

In the name of him who makes fishers of men, dear friends in Christ: Everyone knows the children's game "Simon Says". One player, designated "Simon", issues instructions to the other players like "hop on one foot" or "spin round and round". Each command is to be performed by the others – but only if the speaker prefaces it with the words "Simon says". You lose if you follow an order not issued in the majestic name of Simon. It's pretty simple – but that's the best kind of game for young children. And what makes it interesting is that young children are not particularly attentive when someone is issuing instructions; that, and they are easily deceived. So, when the caller says, "Simon says: hop on one foot", he starts doing it to illustrate what he means. And all the players follow suit. Then the caller will shift his feet and say, "Okay, now hop on the other foot." And sure enough, there will be several players (presumably caught up in the wild thrill of hopping) who follow the example without noticing that the command lacked the magic words. They're busted – because the caller didn't say, "Simon says".

It's a game that gets old fast. Soon everyone catches on, and following or not following the commands becomes drudgery. But in the process of all the hopping, spinning, and high stepping, we learn a valuable lesson. And that's the next time one of your playmates says, "Let's play "Simon Says", you say, "Sure, *but only if I get to be Simon*". Veterans of the game know it's a lot more fun to be the one issuing orders than to be one of the poor slobs who have to obey them. So it's an educational game: first because it teaches us to be more attentive to what we hear; but more importantly, because as we grow older, we begin to apply its second lesson for real: we always want to be *Simon*. In one way or another, we all struggle to mark out our own little territory: maybe a farm, a business, a home – or maybe it's just a room, corner, or corner of your mind or of your time. Whatever it is, it's some place where you can be the only one calling the shots, some piece of turf where your will is law, and where you can say to someone, "Hey, what are you doing? Did *I* tell you to do that? No? Well, *then don't*."

For Simon who would later be called Peter, that place was his fishing boat. On shore, Simon was just a regular working-class guy caught up in the rat race of life. He had a wife, a home, a few kids. And while he was the undisputed head of his household, still, if his was like most Jewish homes, the house was definitely his wife's domain. And if he were a smart man, he didn't challenge that. To complicate matters, his mother-in-law lived with them; so there were two women culturally programmed to manage a household trying to assert themselves there. That's a crossfire situation no man wants to be caught in the middle of. So, for Simon, the house was a place of compromise. It only makes sense that he would have turned elsewhere for his own place to dictate instructions – like his business, say.

But here too his say was not final. He had two partners: James and John, brothers, the sons of Zebedee. Whenever a business decision had to be made, Simon's was only one of three votes. And since the two brothers likely voted as a block, most of the time, if there were any disagreement about how things should be done, what Simon says lost out.

Ah, but all that changed every evening the very moment that his boat left the shore. It was *his* boat and he was man in charge. It would have been a fairly large craft. We know at times Jesus and all twelve of his disciples crossed the lake in one these boats, with ample room for Jesus to lie down and sleep in the stern; so Simon's boat would have been maybe 20 feet long or more, with a crew of five or six guys to operate it and handle the nets. And while the boat is on the lake, Simon is the sole master and commander of both craft and crew. He's a seasoned sailor, he knows his trade, and his crew respects him so that onboard this craft the only things that happen are what Simon says.

And that's exactly what's been going on for all the long and unproductive preceding night. As usual, Simon and the crew gathered around 9:00 PM and set off for a night's work. That's when the fish came into the shallow water near the shore to feed – and so that's when fishing was the most profitable. On a normal night, after six or seven hours, they'd have caught plenty of fish. They'd bring them in an hour or so before daylight while it was still fairly cool, and Simon would sell what he could to the fishmongers at the daily market. If the catch were exceptionally large, Simon could take what they didn't buy to those who preserved fish in salt or oil. Without refrigeration, fish didn't last long in the Galilean sun. And while Simon was out bargaining the best price for his fish, his crew would be cleaning and repairing the nets, and readying the boat for the next night's work. On a good day, Simon would be back to the boat by 7:00 AM, his pockets full. He'd inspect the crew's work to ensure everything was in proper order, make a few corrections to show that he was still the man in charge, and then he'd pay the men their wages and dismiss them for the day.

That's a good day; but today wasn't one of them. No, though they had worked all night – several hours past the time they normally headed for home – they'd not caught a thing. Early on in the evening, every time they let down the nets there was the hope this would be the cast that would break the run of bad luck. But time after time as they pulled the nets back in, long before they had them aboard, the crew could tell by the feel that it was another empty effort. Somewhere in the middle of the night, they pretty much gave up hope. They knew that it was one of those nights that they weren't going to catch anything. The best the crew could hope for was for the boss to admit it, call it a night, and head in. They could hope anyway; but this was Simon's boat, and the only thing that mattered on board was what Simon says. And Simon wasn't giving up. He directed them to all their usual fishing spots. When those failed him, he had them go to areas they didn't use so often that were much farther away. And all the way there and back, well past sunrise when they should have been walking back to their homes, Simon was still ordering them to let the nets down for another cast. They were tired, frustrated, and beginning to get angry; but they did it because *Simon said*.

When he finally directed the boat back in, Simon was in a surly mood. He had nothing to show for the night's work, the crew was acting sullen and sluggish, responding resentfully to his increasingly sharp commands; and he still had to pay them – this time not from the night's proceeds, but rather from his own pocket. He had to go home to get the money – and face his wife and mother-in-law, both of whom were quick to show their irritation when he dipped into what they considered to be the household fund (and therefore part of *their* territory). As he walked back to the shore, he thought how he'd be hearing about it later – and that too added to his sour disposition. When he arrived, he was surprised to see the nets already hanging up to dry and the crew standing around idle, waiting to be paid. "How'd they get done so fast?" Simple: because it was late and they were so eager to get going, they did a hasty and sloppy job. Simon could see weeds and debris still stuck in the nets and holes that fish could easily swim through. "Not so fast, fellas." he barked at them, "Take them down, and do the job right." It made them angry, but they did it – because *Simon said*.

So it was that Simon and his crew found themselves still busy on the shoreline in the mid morning hour when Jesus and the crowd following him appeared. Now understand that at this point, Simon knows Jesus. It began several months earlier, when, caught up in the religious excitement stirred up by John the Baptist, Simon and his business partners journeyed to the desert to hear the fiery preacher's call to repentance. John had baptized them. And then they stayed on with him for some time being taught about the coming kingdom of God. They were still with John when Jesus returned from his temptation in the desert. It was then that John told them that this man Jesus was the long-promised Savior. Simon and his companions spent an evening listening to Jesus teach and then followed him back to Galilee. There they parted ways: Jesus to preach at the synagogues throughout the area, while Simon and the others returned to their trade. Some weeks later, Jesus showed up in Capernaum. Simon was present when Jesus spoke in the synagogue; so he heard him again. There he saw Jesus command a demon to come out of a man. Simon was so impressed that he invited Jesus to dine at his home. Jesus accepted; but when they got to the house they found Simon's mother-in-law deathly ill with a high fever. Just as Simon was thinking that due to the

circumstances inviting Jesus to his home had been a mistake, Jesus went in to the room where the sick woman laid and commanded the fever to depart. It did. It was amazing. More amazing still, from Simon's perspective, was that the old woman then got up and happily began serving dinner to them all. This was his mother-in-law after all. He was used to her crabby, nit-picking and angry criticism. He'd never seen her so energetic and eager to please. This was truly a miracle he thought. Well, then word got out about the cured fever, and soon the house was surrounded by people asking Jesus to heal them too – and he did. People kept coming long into the night; but finally they stopped, and Simon and his guest were allowed a few hours rest. In the morning, however, Jesus was already gone. He'd left to take his message to other towns around the lake.

Simon has not seen Jesus since – until right now, as several hundred people crowded around him, all trying to get close to him, to hear him, to have their questions answered, their complaints heard. He was being mobbed like a major celebrity, and there was no crowd control to hold them back. Jesus was looking for a way to keep order and deal with them efficiently. And that's when he spied the boat – *Simon's boat* – Simon's private domain, where his word was law and no one but no one told him what to do. Simon saw Jesus look directly at the boat and start heading for it. He got up from the nets he was working on and moved to intercept Jesus, getting to the boat just a few steps before. Simon stood in front of the bow, instinctively protecting his little empire; but to his surprise, Jesus stepped right past him and got into it. "Cast off a bit from the shore, will you, Simon?"

Put yourself in Simon's shoes. What do you do? It's one thing to decide to *invite* the Messiah (if indeed that's who he is) *on the Sabbath Day*, a day in which control is already compromised because it belongs to the Lord, over to the house – which is safe because it's sort of contested ground; but it's a different thing entirely to have this presumptuous preacher, on a workday – which belongs to *me*, and on which I've just about reached my limit, and after I'm already off and should be home resting – so it's doubly *my time*, step right into my own private domain and start issuing orders. Just who does he think he is? (Of course, the more important question to contend with is: *just who do you think he is?*) And all of this going on in poor Simon's head in a fraction of a second – he's got to say yes or no. What'll it be? "Well," he thinks, "I can hardly say "no" after all Jesus did for me. The mother-in-law and wife both have been so much easier to live with since his short stay. Besides, if he is who John said he is ..." Simon signaled to his crew who by force of habit respond without even thinking. They quickly grab up the net they've been working on, hop in the boat and shove off. By working the oars a little now and then they manage to keep the boat stationary about 30 feet away from the shore. The crowd sits on the sloping beach that forms a natural amphitheater where all can see and hear clearly. And Jesus speaks to them from the boat.

Simon too sits listening from the stern. This is something he is not accustomed to doing on his boat. Usually it's his voice that has the authority here. It makes him uncomfortable, and the other irritations he's had to contend with today aren't making it any better ... and yet, he can't help being drawn in by Jesus' message. There is sublime *wisdom* and strange *power* in what he says. Simon tries to remain angry, but the stories Jesus tells keep pulling him out of it – and this too Simon finds a little irritating. "I'm tired, hungry, and my boat's been hijacked, and I can't even stay mad about it. Who *is* this man? Why does what *Jesus says* affect me so?"

At about noon Jesus wraps up his message. He dismisses the crowd so they can go home and get their dinner. Simon thinks that he too is about to be dismissed with a great big thank you from Jesus for his services this day. "Simon, I couldn't have done it without you. If there's any way I could return the favor ...". But those words never come. Instead Jesus says, "Put her out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch." This time it isn't even a request: it's a *command*. Simon feels his dander rising again. "*I'll admit he knows a lot about religion; but he sure doesn't know a thing about fishing. Broad daylight ... deep water ... I suppose I'll have to prove to him who's the expert—and whose boat this really is.*" "Okay, Jesus, we've wearied ourselves fishing all night without any luck; but you're the boss. We'll do what you say." The crew members look at Simon incredulously ...

pleadingly ... you're not serious, are you? But a scowl from the boat's master lets them know that's exactly what he means – *and that they had better obey.*

After they'd sailed some distance from the shore, far beyond the point that Simon knew it was pointless to even attempt a catch, with some thinly veiled sarcasm he asks Jesus, "Will *this* do?" Jesus smiles. "Yes, Simon. *This* will do fine. Put down the nets." Simon relays the order: "You heard the man. Do what *he* says." Confused and exchanging puzzled glances, the crew obeys. No sooner had they put them out and Jesus says, "That's good. Now bring them back up." Simon is about to say something about leaving them out longer and pulling them behind the boat for some distance to maximize the catch, but he stops himself. "*No, I've got to show him that he doesn't know what he's talking about.*" "Gentlemen, don't ask questions. Just do what Jesus says."

You know the story: they did. But now ask yourself, "What's going on in Simon's mind as he feels the boat heel over at the tremendous weight of the nets, and he sees his men straining hand over hand to pull them aboard, and now hundreds of fish making the surface of the lake white with their terrified thrashing?" Simon is struck dumb. It comes crashing in on him. This Jesus who has been incrementally entering and influencing my world ... no, *who has actually cast his net over me*, is so much more than an inspired teacher and healer. It dawns on him that it didn't matter where they put down the nets: the fish would have been wherever *Jesus said*. His Word has real authority. *What he says happens.* And then it hits him that it was no accident that he caught nothing the night before. "Jesus, who wasn't even there, did that too. Why? *To show me that I don't have the slightest bit of power or authority even where I think I have the most. And still, here I've been angry and resentful with him trying to protect my precious turf ... trying to maintain control, imagining that what Simon says is what matters most. And all along he's known that too. What must he think of me?*"

Simon falls before Jesus' knees full of holy awe for him and feeling foolish and ashamed of himself. "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man." He is torn three ways: he's feeling unworthy to be in the Lord's presence – so utterly aware and ashamed of his sin. At the same time, he feels threatened, fearing what Jesus' continued participation in his life might mean. He feels certain that it will mean giving up more of what Simon says, and that frightens him. But overall these fears he feels a sense of great need, still powerfully drawn to this Jesus, so that even when he tells him to go away, he desperately hopes he will say, "No, Simon; I'm here to stay."

And that is pretty much what he did hear. "Don't be afraid, Simon. From now on you will catch men." Words of grace and forgiveness; and more than that, words that assured Simon that there was a place and a purpose for him in the kingdom ordered and directed by what *Jesus says* – a vast kingdom where by the power of his Word the work is always full and rewarding. So it's small wonder that when they reached the shore, Simon beached his boat – the piece of turf once ruled by what Simon says – and left it behind.

My question for you this morning is this: What's your boat? What's that piece of turf – either physical or within you – that you're holding back from what Jesus says, where you're afraid to let go of command even though the returns are always empty and unsatisfying, but where you are nevertheless telling Jesus, "Go away." If you know of what I speak, I have good news for you. Jesus says he's here to stay. And now he's stepping aboard your little boat, forgiving you of your stubborn resistance and fear, and giving you his Word to direct and to guide. Let your Simon be silent, and let him hear, believe, take to heart, and act upon what Jesus says. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!