

While I was in South Africa for a meeting last month, I visited Sister Sue Rakoczy, who used to work here in our diocese. It happened to be her birthday, and she invited over 2 other members of her community, Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary from Detroit; all of them are Americans working in South Africa. They each said that on the day they joined the convent in Michigan, if you had told them they would be spending most of their lives in Africa, they would have said you were crazy. They never dreamed their vocation would take them so far away from home. But they love the challenges and joys that missionary work brings.

Each of us has probably looked at the work some other people do, and said, "I could never do that." You might have said, "I could never be a firefighter, or a police officer." "I could never work in an emergency room." Or even, "I could never give myself insulin." "I could never raise a disabled child." "I could never look after a spouse with cancer." In our little world, when we see people act like heroes in their little world, we often say, "You, know, that's really great. But I could never do that."

Maybe we failed at something in the past, and we doubt our abilities. Or we know how selfish we can be, and how hard it is to change our priorities and think of another person. Things seem hard if they require physical or emotional strength we don't have, or if they require virtue we don't have. Things may be hard because we have sinned. In the past we have said no to God's commands, and we suspect we will fail again.

Jesus calls his first disciples in today's gospel, and they want to say no; they could never do that. Simon and his friends are cleaning their nets; they have fished all day, caught nothing, and now they are calling it quits. Jesus decides to address a crowd from Simon's boat. He teaches. The crowd listens. Then he tells Simon, "Put out into deep water, and lower your nets for a catch." Simon says, "We've tried it already. It doesn't work." But to accommodate Jesus he says, "At your command I will lower the nets." They catch so many fish their boats nearly sink.

Simon probably knew Jesus was about to ask him to become a disciple, so Simon speaks first. He falls to his knees, and before Jesus can say, "Follow me," Simon says, "Depart from me." His reason? "I am a sinful man." Simon thought that following a powerful master would require great virtue, and he said to himself, "I could never do this." But Jesus tells him he can. It's hard to argue; Simon and his friends just caught all these fish; they have already done more than they thought they could do. They didn't need extraordinary strength and virtue. All they had to do was obey the command of Christ.

Sometimes at the end of the day, like Simon, we think we have failed. We think we could never do what others do. But Jesus says to us, "Put out into deep water." Try the challenge again. We are more capable than we realize. Jesus will help us. All we have to do is say yes and follow.