



From the Pulpit

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"Into the Deep"
Luke 5

"Once when Jesus was standing on the shore of Lake Gennesaret, the crowd was pushing in on him to better hear the Word of God. He noticed two boats tied up. The fishermen had just left them and were out scrubbing their nets. He climbed into the boat that was Simon's and asked him to put out a little from the shore. Sitting there, using the boat for a pulpit, he taught the crowd."

When he had finished teaching, he said to Simon, "Push out into deep water and let your nets out for a catch." Simon said, "Master, we've been fishing hard all night and haven't caught even a minnow. But if you say so, I'll let out the nets." It was no sooner said than done--an abundance of fish, straining the nets past capacity. They waved to their partners in the other boat to come help them. They filled both boats, nearly swamping them with the catch.

Simon Peter, when he saw it, fell to his knees before Jesus. "Master, leave. I'm a sinner and can't handle this holiness. Leave me to myself." When they pulled in the catch of fish, awe overwhelmed Simon and everyone with him. It was the same with James and John, Zebedee's sons, coworkers with Simon.

Jesus said to Simon, "There is nothing to fear. From now on you'll be fishing for men and women." They pulled their boats up on the beach, left them, nets and all, and followed him." Luke 5

Today is Gospel Sunday and it got me thinking about that word, gospel. The word is derived from the Old English god-spell, meaning "good tidings." It is a word-for-word translation of the Greek word euangelion meaning good message. The gospel is good news. This is a Sunday to celebrate the good news in word and song with special music, and what is that good news we are celebrating? It is the news of Jesus' all encompassing love and the invitation to all to follow Jesus and live that love.

The other good news I hear this morning is about “abundance.” In the story we read, we know Jesus taught the crowd but it doesn’t tell us what Jesus said to that crowd. We could guess that it had something to do with the overflowing abundance of life in God. In God’s love – a love we’re called to share with everyone – there is more than enough for each and every one of us. There is more than enough forgiveness, more than enough healing, more than enough grace. Jesus shows the fishermen abundance in leading them to catch so many fish that their boats almost sink. Jesus tells the fishermen that they cannot keep the good news of how God has provided for them to themselves but they must follow Jesus and spread the word. When we trust in God’s abundance, it frees us from many of our fears about scarcity that stop us from living more fully.

Jesus uses such an interesting image. He says they will fish for people. When I think of fishing, I remember that when I was younger I had a Snoopy fishing pole. In the summer time my family and I would go to a nearby lake and fish. I hated fishing. I am not trying to criticize any of you who enjoy it, but I thought it was so mean to snag the fish with hooks and pull them in flopping every which way. I always wanted to throw them back in the water immediately. So when Jesus says he will make Simon Peter fish for people that sounds like an awful way to bring people into the Christian faith. I don’t think people should be brought into the Christian faith tricked by a lure and dragged in flailing. I was relieved to read Craig Evans’ helpful explanation in the Lectionary Commentary that the “word that Luke uses (i.e., ‘catching [or taking] alive’) is used in the Greek Old Testament for saving the lives of persons from danger.” So when Jesus says that they will be fishing for people he means that they will be saving their lives. The message of God’s love is so transformative that it can change people’s lives for the better.

Ann Svennungsen says “The calling is not to hook people and drag them in, it is rather to cast the net of God’s love all around and then wait with patience for the Spirit’s work and to see if any are caught by God’s vision and grace.” In Confirmation class I teach the youth that even if they don’t remember anything else, the most important message to remember of the Christian faith is to love; to love God, to love ourselves and to love others. When we are called to follow Jesus we are called to follow the way of love and cast our nets wide so that others will experience that love in their own lives.

Many people hear the powerful message of Jesus’ call to follow him and think, are you telling me I’m supposed to go become a missionary in a foreign country? In a presentation that Mother Teresa once gave here in the States, she said that Americans are always saying they think they need to leave their lives here and go to India to work with her. And she says to them, “Stay here, right where you are, and love the people God has given you to love. Care for people right where you are.” This is a powerful message. If you truly want to follow Jesus, you don’t have to leave your home and family. The water is plenty deep right where you live. There’s plenty of challenge, plenty of possibility, and a very clear call to serve right here and now.

Before Jesus tells the men to leave their boats and follow him, he instructs them to go out into the deep water. They have already been fishing unsuccessfully and are ready to head home but they dare to trust Jesus' words enough to strike out into the deep. The deep waters can be dangerous. Have you ever been swimming in deep water where you can't see the bottom or what else might be swimming around you? It can be truly scary.

Maybe "the deep waters" also represent those places we would rather not go, the places of discomfort, vulnerability and unfamiliarity in ourselves, where we might "get in over our heads." We might be in deep waters if we dare to follow Jesus. What if we forgive someone who has hurt us – how will we hold on to the feeling of being right? What if we open our hearts or our church to those who are different than us? What if we share what we have to build a more compassionate world? What if we make sacrifices for the good of others? It is a challenge to trust God enough to strike out into those deep waters. Sometimes we're too tired or sure it won't work, or we've gotten the message that it is most important to take care of our own needs regardless of the well-being of others. We convince ourselves that we would be better off just calling it a day and staying here, in the shallow water, even if we're quietly dissatisfied in the end by the results of our efforts.

Writer Kate Huey says "We'd rather stay right here, in the shallow end of things where our boat won't be rocked, where life is safe, and not strike out into the deep water of possibilities and change; we'd rather mind our own business and keep working on our own security." If we do that our lives will not be as full. If we live in a shallow way we exclude ourselves from unknown joys that can come with the risk of the deep. What does it really mean for us to "leave everything and follow Jesus"? It means that we let go of the idea that there will ever be enough things to secure our future if we don't make room in our hearts and our lives for others and for God. It means that we let go of clenched fists that convince us that our money and our possessions belong to us, not to God. When we let go we find freedom and fulfillment instead of fear.

We can't just go back to our nets and our ordinary lives as if this story is not about us, as if this call were not our call too. Could it be possible to get up every day, do the work of our lives and yet, at the same time, live lives true to the gospel, true to the good news? What if, like Mother Teresa said, our lives could be transformed right where we are, with the people we love and know and our neighbors who we could get to know? It would take imagination, courage, trust, and openness to all the wonders that challenge our expectations. As theologian Rev. Renita Weems, says, "the last thing those tired fishermen were expecting was a showing of God's awesome power right there, at the end of another workday. Why couldn't the same be said of our workdays: that they hold the possibility of seeing God's hand at work in our lives and all around us, even when we least expect it?" It is challenging to think that when we're tired, when we've been trying with no success and are ready to give up, that is when Jesus surprises us with abundance if we're willing to follow him.

Can you go out into the deep waters? What would it mean for you to follow Jesus? God didn't just call the fishermen. God calls us. God is calling you to experience abundance, to be transformed and to share that transforming love with others. What will your answer be? Will you follow Jesus?

Yes!

Amen!

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