

“Going deep”

Sermon on Sunday, February 10, 2019

Based on Luke 5: 1-11

I don't know much about this thing called fishing. Some people are experts at the art of the catch: what hook to put on, which bait to use, what time of day to go, locations that are more promising than others, etc. Me, on the few occasions when I went on a charter tour for deep sea fishing, that is - when I wasn't too nauseous and sea sick, - I caught a few tiny ocean residents, most of them so petite that they had to be returned to the waters to grow up. I would say, if my livelihood depended on fishing, we would get a lot of financial aid for college! So maybe I should switch professions and become a fisherman like Simon Peter. Simon was a professional fisherman. He knew a thing or two about the art of the catch. He had sailed the waters of the lake of Gennesaret probably since his childhood days; but on that day, on that fateful day when he met Christ, when his life was changed forever, he just wasn't lucky. The fish didn't bite. The nets stayed empty. He returned to the shore tired, empty-handed, with nothing to show for his day's hard work.

We hate those days, don't we, when we feel like we might as well have stayed in bed, because whatever we tried, it just didn't go well, it just didn't click. We all have those days every once in a while. And guess what? Sometimes those are the very days when the Spirit of God may want to get your attention, make you aware of something you didn't notice, something that's beyond the narrow confines of what your work defines as “success.” Maybe on a day like that, after the fifth unsuccessful attempt of getting something done, you talk to a co-worker and you learn that she is dealing with a horrible illness in her family, something she would have never mentioned on a “normal” day, lest she interrupt your flow. But now you have the opportunity to show your support and be an even better colleague and pray for that person or find other ways to support her. Sometimes the spirit of God awakens us to our surroundings by slowing us down, by allowing us to fail. Because failure is not always failure in the kingdom of God! Failure can be a path toward greater insight, vision and boldness. Yes, sometimes a bad day is an invitation...

Peter had been out on the choppy sea all day long. The sun had burnt his face. He was tired. So, he volunteered to give up his vessel for a good cause. He allowed this young rabbi from nearby Nazareth to hold a religious gathering from his boat. The teacher had quite a following and the boat provided a nice platform to teach from; people stood at the shore and listened, mesmerized, while Peter and his buddies finished up their day's unsuccessful work, washing the nets, preparing for a better tomorrow. I have to imagine that, while they were doing their work, some of Jesus' words reached their ears and took root in their hearts. Maybe they glanced over a few times, eyes wide open, feeling the spirit of God pouring in through the words of this local rabbi. Maybe Peter thought, “I'm glad I gave him my boat. At least it serves one good purpose today!” And as the preacher finally came to the end of a long presentation and Peter was ready to check on his ship one more time, the Rabbi suddenly approached him and said, “Let's go out again. Let's go into the deep water! Come Peter, let's catch some fish!” Jesus was just getting started! The rabbi was just warming up! Clergy people can be clueless sometimes, you know. They don't know what it takes to go out and start all over again. They don't know much about all the work that's involved. They just say, “Let's fix the cemetery wall, people of St. Peter's! Let's help house a homeless family! Why don't we go to Puerto Rico for eight days?” Yeah, sure. “Pastor do you know what is involved? My company doesn't

give me extra "volunteer days" for this good cause. This Puerto Rico trip will seriously cut into my vacation days!"

Presumably, this wandering clergyman from Nazareth didn't know much about the art of the catch, when and where to go, which bait to use and which hook and all the things that are involved. And maybe he didn't even realize how exhausted Peter really was. He just saw the opportunity, clear eyed and full of enthusiasm.

Clergy are good at preparing religious teachings and sermons, but in more practical matters, let's face it, they are often not the best people to consult. You know, that's why we have lay leadership in our church. It provides an important balance! When I was a young vicar in Pittsburgh some 22 years ago, the congregation had an auto mechanic, his name was Ed, who ran a shop nearby and advised me on the purchase of my very first car, a rusty Buick that he felt was good enough for the asking price and the purpose of giving me some mobility for a year. He was right. It lasted almost exactly a year that Buick, before it fell apart. And when I first unsuccessfully tried to fix something and change the wind shield wipers, which looked really funny after I put them on, and I came back to his shop and asked whether he could take a look, Ed just shook his head and he said, "You take care of the church. Don't touch that car again!" And with a few routine movements, he fixed it.

Now this son of a carpenter turned Rabbi, who did not come from a lake town, who didn't have the fishing DNA, he tells Peter, "Let's go out and get some fish!" The sun was already going down. Visibility wasn't great. Peter is reluctant and he is tired, but he was raised by good Jewish parents and taught to respect the people of God and he said, "We haven't caught anything all day, we haven't had any success (and I don't think we will have success now), but because of you, because I respect you, we will give it one more shot."

Life can be unfair sometimes. You try something and it doesn't work. Then someone else comes along and, for no apparent reason, all of a sudden it's a big success. The fish are biting all of a sudden. How can that be? Life is mysterious. The eastern people talk about Karma. They would say Jesus had the Karma in this moment. He just had the "it factor." Traditional Christian Bible teachers say, this was God's plan. God wanted Peter to follow Jesus and he needed to prove to this no-nonsense guy that he was the Son of God and prove it on his own turf. Whatever it was, Jesus' original word becomes more and more prophetic, it becomes bigger and bigger, the longer we look at this story. "Set out into the deep!" he said. Of all the words in this story, more than even the miracle itself, this stays with me: "Set out into the deep!"

Is that not the mission of every church that bears Jesus' name? Is that not our mission, to dig deeper into our faith until God is no longer a word on our lips but a reality in our hearts, until compassion is no longer a concept we admire from afar but a force that moves us, until fishing for people is not something we reluctantly do with misplaced zeal, but something we can't help doing because we love people in a totally non-judgmental way? It is that kind of deep that Jesus prescribed for Peter and his buddies. It is that kind of deep that Jesus prescribes for the church of today. It is that kind of deep that he prescribes for me and for you, for our lives. There is more to us than what meets the eye. Find out what it is! Go deep! It's also the name of Jesus' charter boat. The vessel is called, "Going deep." Rightly understood, that vessel is another word for "church." **Amen.**