



Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

Out of the Shallows, Into the Deep

February 7, 2010

Luke 5:1-11

The Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Simon, whose name will one day become Peter when the conversion he begins in our lesson for today has progressed somewhat further, is an expert. Specifically, he and his partners James and John, are expert fishermen. It's how they make their living, putting out on to Lake Gennesaret six nights a week with their lanterns and nets to catch fish. But on the night before our story opens, for all their skill and experience and expertise as fishermen, Simon and the others got skunked. It is an experience most folks who fish are familiar with.

While they are cleaning their boats, washing the nets, hanging them to dry, Jesus, who is in danger of being pushed into said lake by a crowd eager for the food of his teaching, asks if Simon might row him out from the shore a bit so he can continue his Bible lesson. Simon, tired as he probably is, perhaps bites his tongue and rows Jesus out a bit off shore.

The lesson over, Jesus says, "Simon, let's go fishing, let's go out where the water is deep." And this time, Simon speaks. Without referencing his credentials as an expert in fishing, Simon points out that he and the others have been out all night, and the fish just aren't in a being caught mood. But just as there was once upon a time a willingness in Moses to turn aside and see a burning bush when he should have been sheep herding, so there is in Simon a willingness to see what might just be possible with this Jesus. We could maybe learn something from Simon, all of us who are experts in one field or another. Into the ordinary comes the holy, more often than the too busy and too full of ourselves ever know.

After all, Simon could have said, "Look, Jesus, you may be a top notch carpenter like your old man, but you don't know fishing like I know fishing. If the fish are to be caught, it's going to be at night when they come up into the shallows, and not in broad daylight out in the deep water. How many fish have you ever caught on this lake anyway?" But Simon sets his expertise aside to see what might happen with this rabbi who so recently healed his mother-in-law and whose teachings always draw a crowd. To put it another way, he suspends his expertise in making a living in order that he might just gain a life. And again, we could maybe learn something from this Simon.

So, maybe still biting his tongue a little, Simon's tired hands grasp the oars and he leans into the rowing, until he and Jesus are well past the drop-off and into the deep water. At Jesus' word, he hauls himself up and heaves the nets overboard. And you know the rest. Turns out Jesus does know fishing,

for the nets are soon so full as to be breaking. James and John row out to help, and even with their boats at hand, the catch is so great the boats are in danger of swamping before they make it back to shore.

I wonder if it wasn't the best day fishing those three fisherman ever had. I wonder if they weren't already counting the money they were going to make off this enormous catch and planning how to spend the week off they could finally take. Maybe they were even planning a great feast for their village. Maybe James or John thought they might just finally have enough money to propose to those two young women their hearts were drawn to.

But it's different for Simon. Seeing what has happened, Simon is frightened. He falls on his knees and begs Jesus to leave him, for he is a sinful person. Somehow being in the presence of true holiness and goodness makes our own efforts at the same look pretty shabby. As William Willimon notes, Simon's problem is certainly not a lack of fish, but a lack of faith, faith in Jesus' ability not only to catch fish, but to transform him for goodness. Jesus does not respond out of the self-help school of psychology and tell Simon he's really not such a bad guy. No, he says, don't be afraid, come and get started on the task of catching people for the kingdom. What matters is not our expertise, either as fisherman or moral exemplars, but rather our willingness to say "yes" to Christ's invitation to join him in the work of the kingdom of God.

And wonder of wonders, the three fishermen did it – walked away from the best day they'd ever had. They gave up the good for the better. They gave up splashing about in the shallows for depth and meaning. They gave up fear for faith. In other words, discipleship begins in the first place with sacrifice. Jesus does not say to them, let me teach you a few religious principles for you to put into practice, and I'll come back in a few weeks and see how you and the business are doing. No, he asks them to sacrifice that which they have already mastered, the art and craft of fishing, that they might begin to grow into something much, much greater. And we are so called as well.

Deep water. Deep water is a place most of us might like to avoid. We talk about getting in over our heads, and that's not a good thing. Most of us like the sunny shallows where the water's warm and we can see the bottom; things start to get dicey when we can't touch the bottom, let alone when an unseen water weed grabs us by the ankle. The shallows are safer in their warmth and clarity and familiarity. But Peter has been fishing all night long without catching a thing. Close to shore may be safer and familiar, but it's not where the fish are. And one of the surest truths of life is this: if what you're doing is not working, do something else. Don't try harder, try differently. And in trying something different, by heading into the depths, Simon becomes someone different. He and the others begin to grow into the fullness of what God created them for.

The experience Simon had out in the depths of the lake caused him to look into the depths of himself. And he didn't much care for what he saw there and wanted nothing so much as the searching light of God's presence in Jesus to leave him. We long for the light of God when our lives are darkened by tragedy or suffering, but how we can also fear, and long to flee, what that light can reveal about ourselves. When Jesus says, "Don't be afraid," I don't think he's telling Simon he doesn't have to be afraid of Jesus, but rather that Simon doesn't have to be afraid of what he's found out about himself. There is no darkness within us – no greed, no pride in our accomplishments or skill, no lust for power

or fame or to have our way, no self-hate for a wrong done to another, no sense of not mattering – that cannot be transformed by living with Jesus in service to the kingdom.

Some years ago I read a cynical definition of an American as someone whose interests are a mile wide and an inch deep. And about the same time, I read Richard Foster's excellent work *Celebration of Discipline* which he begins by saying what the world needs is not more bright people, not more talented people, but more deep people. And that's what this story is about. It's about our being called to get serious about ourselves and about God, about who we are and who we can be in God's love, about what we are called to do that will show forth God's kingdom of justice and compassion.

The great Swiss psychologist Carl Jung once said, "Bidden or not, God is present." That's a bold statement, and one which we would affirm. And maybe we know it to be so true, that we busy ourselves so as to ignore the God who is present. In fact, I think we get this story. I think we know God intersects our lives in ordinary moments. I think we know we need more depth than diversion. And I think we know, and fear a bit, that an encounter with the living God will change our lives. As Bruce Epperly well puts it: [an] encounter with the Holy [comes] with an invitation, perhaps even a command, to choose a new way of life." And we're not sure we want that much of God. All well and good for Simon and James and John to walk away from work and home, just as Abraham did two millennia before, but not me. And so, we protest we're not worthy. We keep our heads down hoping Jesus will go ask someone else. We don't take the time for prayer and silence and stillness and beauty, not because we're so busy, but because we're so afraid it just might be true about God's transforming presence. After all, if I don't watch television, then I don't see the ads, and I don't feel a need to buy stuff. Same way with God. If I keep myself too busy to hear God speak, I won't be able to hear, let alone respond to, a challenging call. Something in us knows discipleship is costly.

I find myself struggling against that very truth. Our story ends with Jesus telling the fisherman that from now on they'll be catching people. If I fish with hooks, I don't much like the image of hooking people, even for Jesus. Fishing with nets isn't much better because that means ensnaring people, trapping them against their own volition. And so, I want to say to Jesus, well, okay, I'm in, but can't we find some better metaphors here, something more inviting, something less aggressive. That's a form my resistance takes.

But notice how Jesus 'caught' these three. He didn't hook or snare them; he revealed himself to them and themselves to themselves, and then new possibilities emerged for their lives. Again Bruce Epperly puts it well: our spiritual experiences are intended to shape the lives of others as well as ourselves. In other words, these personal spiritual experiences, that happen to us a great deal more often than I think we admit, are not intended for private consumption. They are intended to change us so that we can touch other lives with God's grace and compassion which is a very different matter than impressing people with our brilliance, expertise, power or cleverness.

All of which is to say we are not saved for ourselves, but for God, for the work of God, done in the way we see it lived out in Jesus. And Jesus does come to us, to all, again and again, touching us with grace whether in overflowing fish nets or being forgiven after behaving badly or finding the wisdom and courage to stop making the same mistakes.

The Book of Acts records a few of Simon's sermons, the ones he preached after the long, and sometimes painful, apprenticeship by which he became the apostle Peter. Those sermons are quite wonderful and instructive. But I wonder if the one he could have preached as he reflected on how his life was changed one sunny day just after he met Jesus might be simply put:

Come on in, the water's deep and the water's fine.

Amen +