



Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

“Out of the Shallows, Into the Depths”

February 7, 2010

Luke 5: 1-11

Celebration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion

The Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

When I was young, if a person said “missionary,” there was one image that came into my mind. It was the picture of a then elderly man who wore a wide-brimmed pith helmet to shade himself from the sun of Western Africa. Underneath that helmet he had a shock of white hair and a white mustache. He wore light clothing.

In Life magazine or some other leading periodical of the day or on a grainy movie newsreel preceding a feature film at a movie theatre, I would see this man alternately leaning over a patient on a operating table, leading a church service, seated at the console of an impressive organ or pushing a wheel barrow. He was Dr. Albert Schweitzer: theologian, medical missionary, renowned organist, Biblical scholar and superintendent of building and grounds of the mission station at Lambarene in French Equatorial Africa.

First in seminary and subsequently throughout my ministry, I became acquainted and reacquainted with Schweitzer the theologian through his book *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. Particularly compelling me have been these words, which pick up the theme of this morning’s reading from the gospel of Luke.

“He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old by the lake-side He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word, “Follow thou me!” and sets us to the task which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, and conflicts, the suffering which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.”

The He Schweitzer refers to is, of course, Jesus. The best known person Jesus ever came to by a lakeshore was Simon, later named Peter by Jesus. Strictly speaking, Simon knew who Jesus was. But until this encounter with Jesus at the lakeshore, Simon did not know Jesus. To be sure, he had to have suspected, even understood, something was special about Jesus. After all, a short time before the lakeshore meeting, Jesus had been in the home of Simon’s mother-in-law when the woman fell ill. She was very ill, suffering from a high fever, and Jesus healed her on the spot. But it took a miracle in which Simon was involved for him to encounter the reality that Jesus had very special task for him that, in Schweitzer’s words, needed to be fulfilled.

Remembering the encounter, we notice it takes place in the context of daily living for both Jesus and Simon. After healing the sick and casting out demons, no surprise that Jesus had gained a following.

One day, early in his ministry, Jesus was standing by the Sea of Galilee. Suddenly a crowd pressed in on him. Jesus saw that the best way not to be mobbed by the crowd and at the same time meet their need of wanting to hear from him was to get in a boat and teach off shore in the shallow water. So, Jesus, seeing Simon and his boat, along with that of Simon's fishing partners, James and John, got into Simon's boat and taught from there.

After finishing his lesson of the day, Jesus turns to Simon for a one-on-one tutorial. What Jesus said must have been baffling to Simon. Jesus, although a carpenter, by dint of living around the Sea of Galilee, must have known that people fished at night, not in the heat of the day. He also would have known that the preceding night had been an awful one in terms of catching fish for Simon and James and John. After all there were no fish in the boat Jesus just preached from, just nets to wash. But undeterred by all the evidence before him, Jesus says to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." We know that Simon stated the obvious about the fish not biting. Still, letting duty and respect for Jesus trump his doubt, Simon compliantly let his nets down, and we know the rest of the story, for when Simon went to pull the nets out of the water, they were full to overflowing.

Simon's way of handling the overflow was first to call his friends over to help, get the fish into the boat, and then to bare his soul to Jesus. He tells Jesus to go away from him, for he, Simon is sinful. Jesus, for his part, uses those words that God and the angels often use at such times of the divine confronting mortals. Even though the one to whom they deliver the words is scared out of their wits and shaking from head to toe, Jesus says to Simon, "Do not be afraid."

For Simon, those words are too little and too late. He was already shaking like a leaf. More importantly, on a deeper level, Jesus has already revealed himself to Simon and Simon realizes his life will never be the same. For his part Simon has revealed himself as unworthy. But Jesus, master teacher that he is, in this tutorial with Simon, has already sized up his pupil, his disciple. Great teachers see potential in those with the possibility to change, grow and contribute in God's Kingdom. Great teachers see present situations and use them as prologue and springboard to next steps, steps of development that seem logical to the teacher but often out of reach, even terrifying to the pupil. In this case, the rabbi, the teacher from Galilee, after saying "Do not be afraid," delivers this call, this command, to Simon: "... from now on you will be catching people."

"As to those who obey Him," Schweitzer writes, "whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, and conflicts, the suffering which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."

Think of these words from Simon's perspective: to be recognized by this person who speaks with conviction and compassion, to be thought worthy of being his disciple. This was totally life changing. To be sure, Simon, who became known as Peter in church circles, had his ups and downs as the lead disciple during Jesus' life. This was especially true the night before the Crucifixion when Peter denied his Lord three times. But in his heart of hearts, and by new-found strength after the Resurrection, Simon Peter knew who Jesus was and is—the Lord.

When Jesus told Simon to take his boat out of the shallows and into the depths, in reality Simon was leaving the safety of the shore for the unknown that only Jesus could fathom for his life. Casting out his nets into the depths is a way to a new identity for all of us. To mix metaphors, Jesus calls Simon to go out on a limb. Why should people go out on a limb? Because that is where the fruit is.

I have a friend who, while extremely rational, puts himself in positions to be told no by people. In different areas of his life, particularly his business career, he has cast his nets into the depths. Often he has come up empty. But when the big ones hit, and they have, he knows that he has been pursuing what

he believes God has called him to do with his whole being. The result is he has had a rich life full of rewarding experiences.

Up until now, his son has been just the opposite—he seldom puts himself out there. The truth is if we don't put ourselves forward, we will never learn what is out there either to challenge or engage us. Consequently, the young man has cheated himself of experiences that are open to him and therefore achieved very much yet. But the potential is there. It is always there, in the realm of Jesus coming into our lives or special people or experiences that can mold and shape us. Happily, I can report that recently the son has begun studying his father's playbook and living out some of the plays. Someday, he might even call a "Hail Mary" play on his own behalf.

Another friend, Leslie, found herself living in Fresno, California after having traveled extensively and having lived in places such as Honduras and the Philippines. While living in Fresno, some mornings, to get a broader perspective on the world, Leslie would stop at her local Seven-Eleven and buy a couple papers other than the local one. This ritual led Leslie, who becomes everyone's friend at first meeting, and the woman at the counter, Marge, to have numerous conversations over the years. One morning, and it was at the time the Berlin Wall was coming down, Marge asked Leslie, "Leslie, why do you buy all these different papers?"

"Well, Marge, I want to know as much as possible about what's happening in the world, especially now that the Berlin Wall has come down."

"You know, Leslie" Marge countered, "the way I see it is 'one Germany, two Germanys, one Berlin, two Berlins, a wall up, a wall down...what's the difference? If it isn't happenin' here, and not much does, then as far as I'm concerned, it's not happening."

What a sad way to live. There is always something happening in God's world. It might be behind the counter at a Seven-Eleven, in our homes, in the workplace, in our church, in Fresno, in Haiti. Wherever we are, God wants us to be alert to what is happening, to hear Christ's call and to follow him.

Christ calls us to follow him down the road of discipleship. It is the road that not only can--but will--make all the difference in your life and in mine as it made in Simon Peter's. With the clear call to "Follow me!" comes his vote of confidence that you and I can do what he is calling us to do. But first, we must get out of the shallows and into the deep, for it is there, as we are reminded, that "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." (Frederick Buechner)

Indeed, our primary call as Christians is to answer Christ's call to us, which is to be partners of God in the ongoing work of creation.

Let us find bread for the journey at the Lord's Table this morning. Amen.

