

February 10, 2019

Fifth Sunday of Epiphany

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

Go Deeper

Psalm 1
Luke 5:1-11

“Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Luke 5:4



Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio), Miracle of the Fishes

A reading of the gospel according to Luke, chapter 5:

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

I have a pastor friend who thinks fishing should be a sacrament. “After all,” he says, “Jesus told his disciples to fish.” “Fish for people,” say I, “He told us to fish for people, not striped bass.” Though I have no objection to striped bass; they are delicious! He knows it’s not about the fish. My friend has a quiet spirit. Occasionally he needs to break away from the usual, overwhelming

schedule of his life. He needs to inhale the silent, spiritual strength of the water. This is what he is craving (picture to the right). For my friend, like Norman Maclean says in *A River Runs through it*, “there is no clear line between religion and fishing.”



Fishing requires both patience and hope; it was a hope that, at least in Simon Peter’s case, was sometimes disappointing. Peter, James and John didn’t fish for recreation; it was their living. When these guys didn’t catch anything, their families didn’t eat.

The advice Jesus gave to Simon Peter about fishing is much, much more important than even the painstaking instruction Norman’s father gives his sons in *A River Runs through It*. (If you have never seen that movie, get it today; it is exquisite.) Jesus’ clear word to Peter on the Sea of Galilee is simple and absolutely perfect. He says, “If you want to succeed, you are going to have to go deeper.”

Jesus sees a longing in Simon Peter that Simon doesn’t recognize in himself. He says, “Put out into the deep water. I’ve got a hunch there’s a great catch out there.” Is that how you run your business? On a hunch? Simon is an experienced fisherman. You can *feel* his exasperation. He’s worked all night. One translation says, “We have toiled all the night.”¹ And you can practically smell their sweat and feel their aching muscles.

You know that feeling, and so do I. You’ve worked 15 hours straight; you’re about ready to pass out in your bed, and here comes Jesus, or maybe his church, asking you to do something. You feel you have nothing left to give him.

Simon knew fishing. It was his family business, and from what archeologists have found in an around his hometown of Capernaum, he was good at it. It was an area of nice homes with a beautiful synagogue. But even the best fisherman can have a bad night. Now, here comes this rabbi/carpenter telling him how to do his job. And he’s probably thinking “Come on, Jesus. *Nobody* goes out on the Sea of Galilee in the heat of the day. There are no fish on the surface!” He’s right to be skeptical, but listen, no matter how good you are at what you do, *Jesus is better*. He’s better. He’s better at teaching, at engineering, better at healing, better at sales and communications. He’s better. And he knows you better than you know yourself. Listen to him.

Peter did. I don’t know if he understood that Jesus had something much bigger going on, or if he just went along to get along. We all do that, don’t we? Maybe that’s why you’re here today. Somebody said, “Let’s go to Woods.” You were too tired to argue.

That’s how a lot of us get involved in following Jesus. We say, “Sure, why not? ... Let’s go.” Then Jesus shows up and says, “I want to take you to the next level. I want to give you so much more.” Those fishermen got out into the deep, they threw down their nets and before they knew

it, there were so many fish that they couldn't haul them all in. These were not rockfish; they're tilapia. We ate them in the Holy Land. There were thousands of them in Simon's nets. He used hand signals to call the other boat to help them, and they all toiled to gather all these fish into the boat. I imagine that Jesus was out there working, struggling right along with them to bring in this catch. That's Jesus.

Simon Peter's reaction is priceless. He falls down at Jesus' feet, in the midst of all these fish, and cries out, "Get away from me! I'm not worthy of this!" Jesus, instead of saying, "of course you are, Simon," or "a minor point, don't you think?" Jesus says exactly what Peter needed to hear, what we all need to hear. Jesus said, "Do not be afraid."

Do not be afraid, Peter. Do not be afraid, Kathy. Do not be afraid, Jason. Do not be afraid, Matt. Do not be afraid to go deeper. Jesus is asking Simon Peter to trust him. He is asking the same of you and me. Trust is hard in our day. I'm sure it wasn't much easier in Jesus' time.

Dave is my friend. We met in Florida. He is one of the best people I've ever known and one of the best leaders his church has ever had. For many years he sang in the choir, he chaired the Pastor Search Committee, and he led the Christian Education ministry. Dave and my husband are both Viet Nam vets, but Dave had a rougher go of it over there. He came back from Viet Nam with scars, physical and spiritual. Angry and cynical, he was not easy to live with; he and Anne agreed on that. When they first moved to Florida, Anne took the kids to church. She wanted Dave to join her, but he wasn't interested. Around that time a wonderful pastor named John LaMotte visited Dave and Anne. He talked to them about becoming members. He gave them a card to make a financial pledge. Dave remembers holding the card and thinking, "You want me to what?" John, who is one of the wisest men I know, asked Dave to trust, just a little, to try. And so he did. He started coming to worship with Anne and the kids. He'd sit beside her, but he wouldn't sing. Music has a way of saturating your soul. After a while he began to play guitar with the band. He heard John say that Jesus called Peter and the others to follow him, not because they were great, but because Jesus was. In time those guys became great, because they were willing to go deeper. They spent deep time with Jesus.

He's asking you to trust him, to keep your eyes fixed on him. There was another time when Peter and the other guys were out on the water without Jesus. A storm blew up and the boat was tossed around. Suddenly they looked up and saw Jesus walking toward them on the water. Peter stepped out of the boat to walk out to Jesus on the water, and it worked, for a moment, but as soon as he took his eyes off Jesus, he started to sink.ⁱⁱ Trust is everything.

Sometimes we don't give ourselves a chance to trust him. We know we need to spend deep time with Jesus, but we think we can't. There's too much to do. So we come, we sing, we pray, then we bolt for the door. On to the next thing!

Phil Yancey, the wonderful author and journalist, talks about this in his book, *Reaching for the Invisible God*. He tells about a time when he was getting close to burnout. He was doing so much, he felt like one of those old fashioned hand-operated water pumps. With every interview, every speech, every deadline, he felt something drain out of him. Before long there was this emptiness, like he had nothing left to give.

In the midst of all that, he went on a retreat and was assigned a spiritual director, a nun who listened compassionately to his situation. He expected her to say something soothing about what a sacrificial, selfless person he was, or perhaps recommend that he take a long vacation. Instead she said, “Phil, there’s only one thing to do when your reservoir runs dry. You’ve got to go deeper.” He returned from the retreat convinced that his faith depended less on doing fewer things in a day and more on the spiritual depth with which he did them.ⁱⁱⁱ

Here’s the word for us. “Go deeper.” Reach for a deeper trust in God by going deeper in your prayer and worship life, and -- there’s another part to this – and in your love and trust of other believers. Some people are nervous about joining a ministry or a Bible study, a Christ Care group, or another small group. It’s a little bit like joining a really good tennis team – it seems like everyone is better at this than you are. Not true. In the Christian faith everyone is on a journey, nobody has arrived. I don’t care if you’re the Serena Williams of Jesus’ people, there’s always something to learn, some way to grow.

If you’ll allow me to push the analogy a little bit further, Christianity is a team sport. Say you are a good player; you have a decent serve, a good backhand. But if you only hit against the wall, you are not going to get better.

To discover your true game you have to play with others, maybe even some who are better or have been playing longer than you. And – this is the important part -- you have to show up. Attendance is required. To go deeper you need to watch and learn from others you admire.

It is the same with following Jesus. As you go deeper in trust and respect for other believers, you learn things about God. Others in the church will recognize gifts in you that you may never have seen in yourself. And you laugh, and love. Imperfect people hurt and disappoint you at times, but it’s more than worth the risk, because being an active, giving part of the church is the way you honor God. Jesus said, “In as much as you’ve done it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you’ve done it to me.”^{iv} It goes the other way too. When you dishonor and ignore the church, you’re dishonoring and ignoring God.

There was another kerfuffle on social media this week. Ten days ago the Pew Research Center published the results of an extended, international study showing that people who worship God regularly are healthier, happier, and more engaged in their communities than those who don’t worship.^v This is not the first study to show this; we’ve known it for a long time, but the moment those results were released, social media went crazy -- 4.8 thousand comments as of yesterday, most of them saying, “Yeah, we knew that.” There are also the haters who said, sometimes in all caps, “that’s a bunch of bologna,” as if Pew just made the whole thing up, as if it were not a respected research organization. There are the loners who said, “I’m perfectly happy sitting on my porch with my dog and my coffee; I don’t need church.” And I couldn’t help but think, all this is interesting, but it misses the point.

Worshipping God together does make us happier and healthier and more socially engaged, but that’s not why we do this. We worship God *not* because it makes us happy; we worship together because it makes God happy! Amen?

And every time we do, we grow deeper in our relationship with God and one another. Here is the truth: In order to thrive we must go deep – not ankle deep, not knee deep, not waist deep – but all the way. Honestly, the Presbyterian Church has historically been the place you go if you want to be just a little bit Christian. No fanatics here. But that day is over. We can't afford that luxury. There's too much at stake. Jesus needs us to be all in. Faith that will transform the world has to be all in – body, mind and soul.

Jesus said, "Do not be afraid." Trust in God; trust in one another. Go deeper.

A quick Valentine's Day story, and I'll close. There was a Sunday school class making valentines for people in the community. They made one for the county executive and each of the county commissioners, the police chief, and all the officers and firefighters. Then someone got the idea of sending a valentine to God. All the kids looked at each other puzzled, trying to figure out how they could get a valentine to God, until one little guy spoke up. "I know!" He said, "We can put it in the offering plate." Amen?

ⁱ Luke 5:5 King James Version

ⁱⁱ Matthew 14:22-33

ⁱⁱⁱ Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God: What Can We Expect to Find?* Zondervan, 2000, 73

^{iv} Matthew 25:40

^v Joey Marshall, "Are religious people happier, healthier? Our new global study explores this question" *Pew Research Center*, January 31, 2019 <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/31/are-religious-people-happier-healthier-our-new-global-study-explores-this-question/>