

Into the Deep

February 6, 2022

Following the Spirit

Sometimes, following the Holy Spirit takes you into places you never would have planned. Whether it's standing up for something you believe in, taking a risk for the sake of love, or sometimes even pausing and taking a rest for the sake of health and wholeness, sometimes, if we're willing to listen, the Holy Spirit leads us into places that are even richer and more meaningful than what we could have planned on our own.

I'm hoping that's what happened with today's sermon! For weeks, I've been planning to preach about "casting your nets out into the deep," a phrase that Jesus uses in our Gospel passage today that has so much great metaphorical and spiritual potential.

Just outside of my back door, about 20 yards into the Bay, there's a spot where fishing boats troll whenever the water is free. The moment the last of the ice melts, you'll find a boat anchored right there at dawn and at dusk.

I used to joke that it's because I had my husband paint our backyard shed periwinkle a few years back, and so it's just a really easy landmark for boaters to spot, in contrast to all of the gray and beige along the shoreline, but all joking aside, they fish there because there's a steep drop-off right in that exact spot, and so the change in water temperature draws fish to accumulate right there. They're using rods and reels rather than nets, but are literally choosing to fish there because it's where they can cast off into the deep.

But wouldn't you know it, conversations with a number of you throughout the week, our Tuesday noon Bible Study, as well as the news from the wider world is drawing my reflection in a different direction this morning. Oh, I hope we're all still inspired to go deep, rather than stay on the shallow surface, but I'm going to try to get us there from a few different angles.

The Gospel

There is so much substance in our Gospel passage today, the beginning of the 5th chapter of the Gospel of Luke. We start out with a little bit of context: Jesus is standing on the shore of the Lake of Gennesaret, which is another name for the Sea of Galilee, and which is called Lake Tiberias today. There's a crowd pressing in on him, wanting to hear him preach, and so he commandeers Simon Peter's boat, which Peter has just docked after an unsuccessful night fishing. They go out, a little way from shore, and Jesus begins to teach. This is different than the way this story goes in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, in that here, the disciples' call comes amidst Jesus' teaching.

I think this is important for us today, because it tells us that Peter and James and John didn't just follow Jesus because of a catch of fish that seems miraculous, they're also responding to his teachings. I think this is important for people with a scientific worldview, for people who find it hard to wrap our heads around miracles, to recognize that it doesn't necessarily take the supernatural to hitch your wagon to Jesus and his ways, that his teaching is compelling enough.

So, Jesus tells Simon to put his nets down into the deep, and Simon demurs. The text says, that Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.”

Let’s linger there a bit. They worked all night and have caught nothing. For years, I heard this preached as Peter hesitating because Peter was the knowledgeable fisherman and Jesus was this carpenter cum rabbi. That would be like me telling the folks fishing out my back door what to do. This is definitely one way to think of this story, and can lead us into contemplating trusting God, into listening to God even in the situations where we might be considered experts or at least highly competent. It can remind us not to be know-it-alls.

I’m reminded of my dad and I as he escorted me down the aisle for Scott’s and my wedding. He whispered to me, “Slow down, sweetie.” Now, I’ve officiated hundreds of weddings, and therefore facilitated as many wedding rehearsals, and have witnessed countless more, and so I whispered back, “I guess you think you still have something to teach me?” And he whispered back, “You’d better hope so.”

The dynamic at work here could be a reminder to be humble, that the divine still has something to teach us, but that’s not the only way to read this (and, of course, that’s part of why we call this the Living Word of God, because it can speak differently to each of us, depending on our circumstances). So, this could be a situation in which wise Jesus invites successful Peter into some humility, or, it could be wise Jesus inviting tired Peter, exhausted Peter, worn out, weary, dog-tired, depleted, consumed, spent, fatigued, drained Peter, into giving it one more go.

This is one of the places my conversations with some of you took this sermon today. Some of you are SO DONE with pandemic and living what feels like half a life and always having to take so many considerations into account for both your own and public health. Some of you are fried in your relationships – with partners and children and siblings and friends. Some of you are at your wits’ end in job situations in which you’ve been carrying so much water for so long, and the system is so broken and looks like folks are actively working to break it in even different ways.

So, what if what makes this passage the Living Word of God is that, instead of wise Jesus speaking to competent Peter, you hear this today as encouraging Jesus speaking to weary Peter, to fatigued Peter, telling him to cast out into the deep. Casting out into the deep may be Jesus encouraging you to try yet again, or it may be Jesus encouraging you to make a slight shift in what you’ve been doing, or it may be Jesus encouraging you to do something substantially different. Whether you’re in a place where you could use a dose of divine humility or divine encouragement, this verse invites us into action, into hope, and into trust, and does so by telling us of the breathtaking abundance that results.

You’ll notice that I’ve been very careful not to reference this as the “miraculous” catch of fish. Again, I do this very intentionally, because rather than this being a story of God breaking the rules of nature, I think this is a story of trying again, of doing things a little differently, or maybe even a lot differently, and that giving us the eyes to recognize the divine in our midst. Christian Wiman of Yale Divinity School writes of “our own blindness, habit, and fear forming a kind of constant fog that keeps us from seeing, and thereby believing in, the forms that grace takes in our everyday lives.”

In 1940, Gilbert Fowler White paraphrases a conversation with Albert Einstein as saying, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is.”

Perhaps, the tremendous catch of fish in today’s Gospel is reminding us to see the world for what it is, to see God’s abundance and beauty and magnificence all around. Wiman goes on to suggest, “What we call doubt is often simply dullness of mind and spirit, not the absence of faith at all, but faith latent in the lives we are not quite living, God dormant in the world to which we are not quite giving our best selves.”

And so, maybe, the result of casting out into the deep, is the inspiration to live lives that once again tap into faith, tap into living our potential. But the verse in the Gospel that surprised me this time is what comes next, where Peter reacts to the abundance by saying: “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinner.”

Whoa! What is that about? Our church doesn’t use “sinner” language a lot, but it’s definitely out there, not only in popular culture but also in our psyches. If I hear one more joke from a groomsman at a wedding rehearsal about how surprised they are that the walls of the church didn’t fall in when they crossed the threshold my eyes may stay rolled into the back of my head permanently.

Why would “I’m a sinner” be a response to divine abundance? I’d like to suggest that THIS dynamic, this right here, is substantial to Jesus’ purpose in our lives. I’d like to suggest that Peter was reacting to the dominant power dynamics in 1st century Palestine, power dynamics that are not all that very different than they are today, and that Jesus is inviting him, and all of us, into something different. Peter experiences God’s abundance, experiences the power of going deep, and immediately becomes fearful and anxious.

- “There’s something wrong here.”
- “I’m not worthy.”
- “Once you figure out who I really am, this is all going to fall apart, so I’d better just throw a wrench into things before we get too deep.”

But what does Jesus say? How does he respond? “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” Jesus invites Peter into a life of mutuality, a life in which Jesus spends a substantial amount of time trying to re-order the dominant power dynamics. Of course, this is a project that human society is still working on.

Conclusion

In fact, it’s at the heart of a series of novels that two of our fellow church members are writing. Our Communications Coordinators Ruth Homrighaus and Mary Ann Hudson write the Prairie Nightingale mystery series which can be found on Kindle Vella. The series, set in Green Bay, is ostensibly a cozy mystery series, in which the protagonist, surrounded by a cast of supporting characters that you get to know more deeply in each book, solves a different crime in each novel. But much more than that, their Prairie Nightingale series is an attempt to draw the reader into

exploring power dynamics, our expectations of how power works, and imagining what life might look like if we doubled down on the project of living based in mutuality rather than dominance.

There's so much here to explore, so much that intersects with living a life following Jesus, that you can expect to hear more here in the coming weeks. As our Gospel passage ends with Peter, James, and John leaving everything and following Jesus, I'm reminded of a passage from F. Scott Fitzgerald that I read recently:

“There will come a time in your life when you are required to abandon everything that is safe and that you have known to be true and set off on a journey into the forest of your dreams. You will disappoint some and inspire others...”

And so, the lessons of our text today are manifold: Whatever your situation, cast off into the deep. Seek to recognize God's abundance in your midst. Respond, not with the received power dynamics of dominance but rather with integrity and mutuality.

And then go, for in doing so who you are and who you will become will draw people to God and God's ways. May it be so. Alleluia, and amen.

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