

Into the Depths
Luke 5:1-10
February 4, 2007

Fish is a staple food in Palestine. A thriving fishing industry flourished on the Sea of Galilee in Jesus' time. There were three main varieties of fish found in Galilee: carp, catfish, and large pan fish, including tilapia, also known as "St. Peter's fish."

Fishing in Jesus' day is a communal activity. When I traveled to Israel and Palestine 10 years ago, I saw the remains of a first century fishing boat which had been discovered in the mud of the Sea of Galilee. It was large enough to accommodate a crew of four to seven, powered by sails or oars.

Peter and his fellow fishermen probably use a trammel net. Fish swim through the larger outer mesh and strike the back wall of finer smaller mesh. The nets work best when the fish cannot see the web, as at night. This is the only kind of net that is washed.

Washing the net is what the fishermen are doing when Jesus comes along. The crowd around him is so large that Jesus needs some distance in order to address them. He asks to use one of the boats as a platform. He sits down in the boat and teaches. Upon finishing, he speaks to Simon Peter, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answers, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

What do we hear in Peter's voice? Respectful obedience? Somehow I doubt it. It is likely there was sarcasm. Imagine the inner dialogue going on in Peter's mind, and probably those of the other fishermen. "We're the experts here. We're the ones who worked all night using all our skill and equipment and caught nothing. Now an upstart rabbi from nowhere is trying to tell us where to look and what to do. He even tells us to use the wrong kind of net in broad daylight. Who does he think he is? We'll pull up another failure for him."

In spite of any doubts and frustration, the fishermen let down their nets. To their astonishment, they catch so many fish that the nets start to break. Even when their partners bring a second boat to be filled with fish, both boats began to sink. The deep water holds great potential beyond their imaginings.

Perhaps even more amazing than the large catch of fish is Peter's response. He falls on his knees in a gesture of submission and obedience. He recognizes his unworthiness in the face of Jesus. "Go away from me,

Lord, for I am a sinful man!” The captain of the boat admits his wrongdoing before his crew. It is an act of great humility. Peter’s address of Jesus also changes from “Master” to “Lord.” Peter relinquishes control as captain of his life, and looks to Jesus as his new Captain.

Jesus responds with assurance, “Do not be afraid,” and with a commission, “from now on you will be catching people.” Peter’s initial doubt is forgiven; he probed the depths as requested, and now he is given an even larger pool to explore. Jesus is not interested in guilt and humiliation. Jesus’ interest is in transformation, in turning people toward following the way of Jesus. Peter recognizes an opportunity to move beyond the shallows of life into deeper water with great potential for richer adventures. In spite of the risk, Peter and his partners leave everything, their families, their fishing equipment, their livelihoods, on the shore and follow Jesus. They recognize that they can do far more under Jesus’ power than on their own. To fish all night without Jesus they catch nothing, but to fish even in daylight with Jesus yields an abundant harvest. They dive into the deep waters of discipleship on a course charted by their new Captain, Jesus Christ.

Jesus asks the men to trust him enough to take a risk. He asks them to venture beyond the shallow familiar waters into deep waters. He asks them to abandon well-known routines and try a new way of doing things. Jesus calls them to an act of courage and trust. They face their fears and doubts and abandon themselves to the depths of abundant life.

Jesus’ request to put into the deep comes at a point of failure and vulnerability for the fishermen. They “worked all night long but have caught nothing.” We can imagine their feelings of futility and fatigue. We have found ourselves in situations of struggle when our pursuits seem to hit brick walls. We long for an escape. We devise any way we can to avoid dealing with the situation. We’d rather live on the surface of life, moving through unreflectively, mechanically going through the motions.

But life usually pushes us deeper. Crises push us into the depths. Unexpected challenges plunge us into experiences we’ve never had before. Surprises push us into uncharted waters that we never wanted to explore. We’d prefer to stay in the shallow water where we know how to swim, where we can easily touch bottom when we get tired and need to catch our breath. We want to stay within the safety zone where someone can come and rescue us if necessary. But life doesn’t usually let us live in the shallows. It plunges us into the depths.

Deep is the opposite of shallow and the opposite of high. Truth is deep, not shallow. When we suffer we enter the depths, not the heights.

Depth is a quality of both truth and suffering. In order to discover the truth, we need to go into the depths. Suffering finds us in the depths, even as the Psalmist writes, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord” (Psalm 130:1). In the depths we know truth and suffering. In the depths we find God, revealing truth and sharing our suffering.

Paul Tillich was a German theologian who fled Germany during the rise of Hitler. Tillich encouraged us not to “look for God in the heights of heaven. Look for God in the depths. Plumb history for its meanings. Plumb the unconscious for its truth. Plumb relationships for their revelations. God is not high and lifted up; God is in the depth dimension of everything – you will meet God when you plumb the depths of sorrow or grief; you will meet God when you follow modern art and allow it to lead you into the depths; you will find God when you go deeper and deeper into your fundamental relationships rather than pursuing a sequence of new novelties and passing pleasures.”¹

We might look at life as an unopened package or as an interesting story to be told and lived. We can admire the unopened package, delighting in its bright wrapping and colorful trimming. But unless we open it, we miss out on the real gift hidden within. When we take the risk of opening the package to explore its inner contents, we discover greater depth. When we examine our stories to discover their meanings and morals, we grow in maturity. When we are willing to go to a deeper level, we find a hidden realm alive with teaching, meaning, and healing that are flowing to us from the Divine.

In my years of ministry I’ve been through several seasons of conflict in some of the churches I’ve served. I naively entered ministry thinking that in a church everyone would get along and everything would go smoothly. It didn’t take too long to discover how wrong my assumption was! Although I would rather avoid conflict like most of us, I’ve waded in those troubled waters several times. Each time the water was deeper and the turbulence more intense. But each season prepared me for the next. The lessons learned from experience, study, prayer, and reflection stretched me. They transformed me and, unbeknownst to me, prepared me for deeper waters in the next adventure! When I review my life story, I realize how those experiences shaped and formed me into the person I am today. I recognize that life is a series of dives into the depths and it is in the deep waters where we mature. Spiritual growth emerges in the depths.

Jesus does not abandon Peter and his fisher friends when he tells them to put into deep water. He is with them. He accompanies them into the depths. When we invite Jesus to accompany us through life’s journey, we

will discover unanticipated blessings. It doesn't mean that Jesus will reverse the consequences of life, nor will there always be a net overflowing with fish awaiting us. What we can count on is a divine presence accompanying us into the depths. When we surrender to the often painful depths, we will experience the surprising abundance of God's grace.

Jesus invited Peter to join him in "catching people." One meaning of that phrase is to revive or make alive. Jesus catches people in order to make them spiritually alive. When we are in the depths of troubled waters, we can trust that Jesus is catching us, renewing our strength and raising us to life anew.

Put out into the deep waters, my friends. Invite Jesus to accompany you and to catch you. Experience the surprises of God's grace, even in the depths, refreshing your spirit and drawing you to new life.

¹ Rev. Bob Olmstead, “Put Out Into the Deep,” First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto, February 5, 1995.

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