

PUSH OFF INTO THE DEEP WATER  
Luke 5:1-11  
February 7, 2010  
First Mennonite Church of Champaign-Urbana  
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What, I wondered, should be the preaching text for the Sunday after Cindy's retirement? How would we be holding the change and its challenges? What Word would call us to embrace this new season in our congregational life?

I turned, as preachers often do, to the church year calendar of liturgical texts known as the Revised Common Lectionary. Today, the fifth Sunday in the season of Epiphany, in year C of the three-year cycle, when the Gospel of Luke is featured, the assigned Gospel reading is this one. Many, many sermons are being preached on Luke 5:1-11 at this very moment. But as is always the case, the accents we hear in the Scripture are dependent upon our context and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Here we are, between associate pastors. Here we are, trying to figure out how to go forward without the long-time leader who anchored us in our history and who devoted herself far above and beyond all formal expectations. Here we are, weary, in recovery mode, having gone all out for a fantastic retirement celebration. It feels like our boat is empty.

And yet, here we are, marking 46 years since the beginnings of our congregation in February 1964—46 years of wonderful Christian community and social justice witness. Here we are, welcoming a talented and vibrant interim associate pastor. Here we are, opening our ears and our hearts to the story of Jesus calling his fisherman disciples.

Receiving this story, we receive assurance of God's abundant grace and provision. We also discover a template for how to live into God's call.

Jesus has been teaching in the synagogues. His message in Nazareth, you'll remember from a few weeks back (Luke 4:14-22) was about bringing good news to the poor and disenfranchised. The crowds have grown as his reputation continues to spread. As chapter 5 opens, the crowd is expectantly pressing around Jesus, wanting him to tell about the kingdom of God. The people receive the teaching for which they hunger, once Jesus positions himself in a fishing boat a little ways from shore. Sitting in the boat, he teaches them.

At this point, the Gospel writer zooms in on the fishermen who become Jesus' formal disciples. Specific, named individuals are spotlighted—Simon Peter and his business partners.

We must not confuse the historical prominence of these disciples with the ordinary quality of their lives when they first encounter Jesus. Indeed, they are simply hardworking fishermen, who cast their nets all night long, for that is when fishing is best. Their livelihood depends upon a good catch; but like all of us, they experience failure from time to time.

On this particular occasion, the failure is complete. What have they brought to shore, after an entire night of fishing? Nada! Nothing!

Their boats are empty. They are bone tired, yet still have to take care of their fishing gear before they can rest. Maybe there is food for their families at home, maybe not.

Jesus would have at once understood their plight. Still, he hops into Simon's boat and asks of him a kindness—to push off a bit from the shore. Along with everyone else, the fishermen hear Jesus' message.

From his teaching flows an invitation, an invitation to receive what is needed for abundant life, in this case a catch of fish. **Hearing Jesus' invitation** is the first act of obedience. Hearing, in the sense of suspending our worldly wisdom and silencing the inner voice that says we know best, opens us to receive the life giving word Jesus offers. For Simon, hearing the invitation means yielding his otherwise well-founded preconception that no fish are to be found in the lake waters at that time. It also means yielding his weariness and understandable desire to head home and sleep. Simon Peter hears the invitation: "push off into the deep water, and let down your nets into the catch of fish." His literal response to Jesus is: "at your word, I will."

The second step is **trusting**, trusting enough to push off into the deep water, versus staying in the shallows. This image of the deep water speaks powerfully to me. Growing up in Paxton when I did, there was no swimming pool handy. Consequently, I was—and still am—a timid swimmer. Deep water means that I can't touch the bottom with my feet and that I am far from shore. I hesitate to be in deep water without water safety-qualified companions or at least a life jacket. In deep water, we have to trust that we will be buoyed up, that our companions will rescue us if we fall in, that God is with us no matter what. And indeed, Jesus is with Simon in the boat.

When the magnificent fish catch materializes and overwhelms the crews of both boats, Simon gains insight. He sees. He sees on a deeper level than the material fact of many fish. This action is **seeing** or acknowledging the wonder-working power of Jesus, whom Simon Peter now addresses as Lord.

Here we arrive at the heart of the story: "he fell at Jesus' knees, saying: 'Go away from me, for I am a sinful man, Lord.'" Jesus is worthy of worship, but in encountering the divine, we come face to face with our own unworthiness. Thus, the necessary next step is **responding to Jesus as Lord by admitting our shortcomings**. When Simon Peter confesses his sinfulness, he wrongly assumes that his sins disqualify him from associating with Jesus. He also experiences genuine disquiet, because he has lost control of his predictable way of life. In fact, things are crazily out of control. The amazing catch has caused the fishing nets to start tearing and the boats are now so full that they are on the verge of sinking.

Jesus does not back away from Simon. He listens to the underlying disquiet and steadfastly calls Simon to give away his fear. Like Simon, we learn that we are not qualified by being exceptional or perfect and that we are not disqualified by having sinned and fallen short. With astonishment, we experience the abundant nurture of Kingdom community, where food and love are freely shared. Out in the deep water, we give ourselves over to God's provision and leading. This movement has to do with ***experiencing God's boundless love and grace.***

The final movement in the story is ***accepting God's call on our lives.*** For Simon and his fishing partners, this is acted out by their releasing everything and following Jesus. They draw their boats up on the shore for others to use, for they have been assigned a new vocation, namely the capturing of people, or as the Greek literally says, capturing them *alive*. This very interesting phrase suggests a rescuing embrace. One commentator recommends that we think of this as being caught in Jesus' love or captured by love. Another suggests the verb captivate: "Can we learn to captivate people with Jesus' love? Can we talk about our own discipleship as being captivated by Christ?" Since the point of being captured by the Gospel good news is for life to flourish, another suggestion is that we hear Jesus commission the disciples in this way: "You will be restoring people to life and strength."<sup>1</sup>

Whatever nuances we choose, the point is people and their welfare. The calling is about keeping people alive, in the fullest sense of life. Frederick Niedner writes: "Here is a truth to cherish always: We don't mend, tend, or haul the net; rather, by God's grace we *become* the net."<sup>2</sup> Let's think of this as non-violent fishing – wrapping the net of love around those who are drowning, gathering them in to community where Christ's peace is made visible.

At this time in our congregational life, we are vividly aware of changing patterns of responsibility, new calls on people's time and talents, the need to trust in God's provision for us, to give ourselves over to the new thing God is doing in our midst. We are being asked to push off into the deep water and to relinquish our fear.

Already, signs of God's abundance and provision have been showing up. Last Sunday, around 2:30, I left a lunch gathering with Cindy and Clark and their family. Two hours later, Samantha Lioi arrived on my doorstep. Not even a single day passed without my having a colleague in ministry. Today, Samantha will be commissioned as our interim associate pastor. God is good!

A number of persons have stepped forward to ensure that our ministry needs are covered. Our new worship planning team spent a long, energized evening engaged with Samantha and me around planning for Lent. God is good!

A team approach to monitoring our safe church policy is emerging. God is good!

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Stoffregen, "Luke 5:1-11," [www.crossmarks.com](http://www.crossmarks.com), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Niedner, Jr, "Amateurs and rookies," *Christian Century*, January 24, 2001, 9.

Our Elders have volunteered for regular spiritual care visits with folks in the congregation. God is good!

We learned that a new family with three children between the ages of 15 and 9 will be moving to our area this spring. They are active members of Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship and have already invested considerable energy in making connections with us. God is good!

Now I ask each of you: Do you hear Jesus' invitation? Are you prepared to push off into the deep water? In the coming weeks, please pray about these questions in your times of private and family prayer.

Depending on your circumstances, you might think about them in one or more of these ways:

- Will you answer Jesus' call by asking to be baptized?
- Will you answer Jesus' call by becoming a member of the body of believers that is First Mennonite Church?
- Will you answer Jesus' call by volunteering for new roles in our congregation?
- Will you answer Jesus' call by inviting persons and families to share in the abundance of life in Christ and welcoming them to worship and fellowship with us?

As Parker Palmer says, "Without our active cooperation, God's abundance remains in the realm of the potential, always there, always available, but forever untapped."<sup>3</sup> Together, let's push off into the deep water and bring in the abundant catch.

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<sup>3</sup> Parker Palmer, *The Active Life* (San Francisco; Harper, 1990), 135.