

Casting Deep

Luke 5:1-11

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Luke 5:1-11(NRSV)

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, 2he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 3He 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. 4When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' 5Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.' 6When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. 7So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. 8But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' 9For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; 10and 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.' 11When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

They were listening, even pressing in on Jesus to hear the word of God, says Luke. These were no Presbyterians, the front rows in the sand were filling up. People were sitting on cushions in front of the front row, spilling over into the chancel of Lake Gennesaret. Jesus was proclaiming the good news of the coming reign of God, and the message was insatiable. The Word had drawn them near.

The only real word of God that Jesus has shared with anyone at this point in Luke's gospel is a reading from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The promises of God made through the ancient prophet were suddenly real and present. Apparently that sounded nice to these people, struggling and wandering and wondering about God. It sounded so nice, in fact, that the people pursued Jesus to the edge, the edge of the waters, and there they stood, listening.

As they stepped and shuffled and elbowed and inched toward Jesus, however, he continued to move to the waters, until he got into Simon's boat and became one of my favorite images in all the bible, the balanced and floating preacher. Jesus was teaching, speaking the word from the boat, the captives and oppressed will go free, the blind will see, and the Lord will forever be. The words dissipated, but the moving notice did not. Jesus said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' This is the movement of the gospel of Jesus Christ, put out into the deep water, and let your nets down. So be careful, when the preaching Jesus hops in your boat, it could be a while before you see the shore again.

As an adult interested in religion, I decided to go to the "school of religion" at Emory University. Okay, take a class. I would never have called it "seminary" back then, because that's where preachers went to school, and I was certainly not a preacher, didn't want to be one. That was a career for really religious people. No, I was interested in religion, the impact it had on people and cultures, the impact religion had on everyone else in the world but me. So I drew near to religious studies for the first time, and drew near to the Bible for the first time, found myself standing on a shore somewhere listening to the word of God, really listening, for the first time. I began to hear these ancient stories of hope, calls to justice, and a relentlessly faithful God, and discover that the more I learned about them, and the contexts out of which they came, the more these stories started to sound like my stories. And the more I started to discover that words for my long, hard story had

been written down 2,000 years ago, I heard Jesus' call for the first time, "Put out into the deep water and let your nets down."

I suddenly began hearing these stories, the ones we get in bite sizes on Sunday mornings in worship, in all their bigness. The Word of God. Creation stories answering why we're here, not how. Prophets predicting the coming of the great King Hezekiah, not Jesus. The early Christians interpreting the mystery of Jesus Christ in the symbols and context of the Hebrew Bible. The beauty of the Trinity, revealing a God who knows no one way of being, and is all about relationship. As the preaching Jesus put me out into the deep water, I felt myself suddenly catching something heavy and exciting, and overflowing beyond my control, it was a haul that was too great to harvest on my own, I had to have the help of others to bring it in. Did you notice, by the way, that Simon's catch, they had to signal to their partners in the other boat to help bring in the nets? That sure sounded like the first church of Jesus Christ to me.

And as the Word of God in Jesus had us out in the deep waters, hearing poetic and true language of promise, lament, hope, relationship, and community, we were all asked to go take our biblical and theological language and go apply it in a context. Which in my case was a family of 7 from Mauritania Africa, relocated war refugees in Atlanta, devout and beautiful Muslims. I had been told they, upon arriving in the United States for the first time, were welcomed to a waiting room, where they could wait until they were ready to talk to a social worker. After an hour, they never came out of the waiting room, and the social worker discovered it was because no one in the family knew how to use a doorknob. "Put out into the deep water and let your nets down, there."

I was asked to tutor a boy in this family named Djiby, 10 years old, at the International Community School. I first met with him for an hour in the cafeteria. He would not speak to me, just nodding and shaking his head, for an hour. We pointed to some pictures, and I'm not sure if we ever made eye contact. And then our time was over.

Then I arranged through a translator who spoke Pulaar, their language, to visit Djiby's family in their home one day. I will never forget the visit, going deeper and deeper into the belly of poverty, into the projects, and as I parked my car I wondered if it would still have wheels when I came back to it. I came near the unmarked door I was directed to, and noticed that the apartment next to theirs was vacant, with the windows shattered out of it, and a swarm of bees had colonized it and terrorized anyone who dared approach. So there I was, knocking at a strange, terrifying door, surrounded by bees, paralyzed with fear, at the doorstep of something that seemed to be low on redeeming qualities.

What lay on the other side of that terrifying moment would be revealed over the next two years. It began with some low-on-conversation meals at their apartment, when they shared their precious little food supply with me in delicious and exotic ways.

But for all my education, I must have been the world's worst tutor, because Djiby continued to struggle in school, especially spelling. My one charge in this relationship was to tutor the boy, and even though I had helped the family with an oppressive landlord, bureaucrats, and loneliness, but I could not teach spelling to a 10 year old. Then one day, I gave up, and brought over a brand new soccer ball. We were out in the projects grass-deprived courtyard, kicking the ball around, when I noticed a joy on Djiby's face I had not seen. We played and played, until he had me stand between two dead trees and play goalie.

The whole experience has left me with an experience of the gospel that lies in the deeper waters, but like any good gospel from God it is not just beautiful and something to reminisce about, it is also HAUNTING. The moment this joy of spelling soccer came into my life, and transported me to a place I never thought I'd be in my whole life, I began to wonder why it took a field study class requirement to get into that relationship in the first place. Why my busy, intense everyday life never made room for such an experience. I think it was something like this that may have caused Simon, after the overwhelming catch was made, to fall on his knees, and admit to Jesus, "go away from me Lord for I am a sinful man!" Or as Isaiah caught a glimpse of the divine,

he felt compelled to confess, “I am a man of unclean lips!” It is only by drawing near to God, and being drawn out into the deep places where strangely and improbably grace abounds, that we see ourselves as turned away from these deep places of blessing, and therefore turned away from God.

Put out into the deep water, says Jesus, and let your nets down. Let this be our Lenten charge this year, discovering some place further out from shore, further away from comfort and security, further away from our place of privilege, further away from thinking that we have all the answers. I encourage you to think about Lent as a time of preparation for understanding the resurrection, which many do practice faithfully by giving something up, many of us may have done that. But here’s another Lenten question, where will you go? Put out into the deeper water, where is that for you? Is it volunteering? Perhaps joining us for some deep listening and questioning in our Lenten Sunday school series after worship. Make room for God by going out, humbly and boldly and trustful that there blessing and abundance and, if God’s will be done, transformation live.