



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Deep Water”

Luke 5:1-11

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I know who to ask for advice. Especially when it comes to fishing. If I want to know where to catch fish, what bait to use, how deep to cast, I stop at a local bait and tackle shop. The people who work in such places always know their stuff. The other people I seek out for advice are the people I run into who are actually fishing. The easiest way to start such a conversation is by asking, “Catch anything?” If the answer is “yes”, there are all sorts of follow up questions: “What kind of bait are you using? How far down are you fishing? Any other tips?” In my experience, people love being asked for such advice.

In today’s reading, as far as I can tell, no one asks Jesus for his advice. And Jesus usually isn’t one to offer it unsolicited. But in this reading, Jesus is just full of helpful suggestions. He’s just finished preaching and he strikes up a conversation with a fisherman, one Simon who will soon be known as Simon Peter.

“Go out into the deep water,” Jesus says “and there let down your nets.” Jesus is giving Peter fishing advice. He must know a lot about fishing. He doesn’t know anything about fishing. Jesus knows a lot about God. A lot about us.

Evidently, this conversation isn’t about fishing. “Go out into the deep water,” Jesus says. He is asking Peter to trust him. To trust him so much that Peter will be willing to leave the safe, shallow places in his life and begin to explore the depths. To trust him enough to go out where the water is more dangerous, where you can’t see the bottom, where you aren’t sure exactly what’s down there. Jesus challenges Peter to go to the limits of what he thinks is possible, not only for him but for those all around him. “Go out into the deep water,” says Jesus, “trust me and see what happens.”

I love this invitation that Jesus extends to Peter and to the rest of us. Don’t skim the surface. Go deep in your life of faith. Don’t play it safe. The best things are to be found through a willingness to uncover and dig and go beyond the superficial.

About twenty years ago, I attended a Christmas gathering of a church young adult group. We were going around a circle sharing our favorite Christmas memories. There was story after story about baking cookies, and unwrapping presents and enjoying time with family and friends. They were all pleasant, happy stories.

And then we got to a woman I’ll call Lisa. Lisa said, “I really don’t have any happy Christmas memories. Ever since I can remember, it’s been a hellish day. It’s the day when my family is at its worst. When we seem broken beyond repair. It’s the day when the gap between the family I wish I had and the family I actually do have is at its greatest.”

She went on to tell stories of her family’s struggles at Christmas time. With both alcoholism and depression in her family, the stories weren’t heartwarming. They were rugged. And honest.

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As you can imagine the gathering changed. The story telling changed. People began to talk about the truth of their lives. And about finding God in the midst of that truth. Lisa transformed a perfectly nice evening into a hard, challenging, grace filled revelation because of her willingness to go deep.

Going deep isn't easy but it does create new possibilities. The future disciples are told to go deep and they do and the result is immediate. They catch a lot of fish. Where once there was nothing, now there is abundance. Their nets are overflowing.

Going deep is good and productive and draws us closer to God. "Thanks for sending us out into the deep water," Peter tells Jesus.

Actually, that's not what Peter says. He says, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Huh? What does that have to do with anything?

Peter looks deep within himself. He is done with being superficial. He is done with just making a living, going to the bar with his buddies until closing time, falling exhausted into bed and getting up the next morning and beginning the whole thing over again. He wants more.

Peter goes deep. He goes deep, for the first time ever or the first time in a long time and he doesn't like what he sees.

He spends some time in the depths and discovers...all is not well with his soul. Inside, he is broken. Struggling. Not whole. Not holy. Things are not well with his soul. It probably doesn't help that Jesus is sitting right next to him. Sitting next to love and grace incarnate, Peter can't help but see all his failures. All his brokenness. All is not well with his soul.

How are things with your soul?

We have gotten out of the habit of using such old-fashioned language. Nowadays, we use different words to describe our condition. We are tired. We are stressed. We need to see a counselor. We need to exercise more. But, the Christian tradition has always made the claim that there are broken places within us that cannot be knit back together by medicine or psychiatry or diet and exercise. In other words, all is not well with our souls.

What if we were to spend the next ten minutes in silence, with one single goal: look deep into our souls and see what we find. What would we discover?

Peter has no trouble admitting that all is not well with his soul. Peter has his faults – they are many – but he tells the truth. He calls things the way he sees them. He readily admits to Jesus his utter inadequacy.

How does Jesus respond to Peter's confession of sin? Not with theology. Not with a ten point sermon on the power of grace. He says, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will be catching people."

"Do not be afraid." Jesus acknowledges that there is something scary about discovering the truth of our lives. Jesus reassures Peter. Be brave. This is good and holy work that prepares you for the good and holy work that I want you to do. Because I have a job for you.

Peter has just finished telling Jesus about his failings and there is Jesus making him a job offer.

Jesus tells Peter that from now on, "you will be catching people." It's not the best translation from the Greek. A more accurate and interesting translation is "you will be saving men and women alive." The Greek verb here

describes rescue from the peril of death and hopelessness, not creatures in a net writhing in their last gasps. This is about inviting people to live the fullest life possible.¹

This is about going deep. This is about facing our brokenness. This is about discovering abundance, fullness, grace. Our nets are full of that which we and the world most need.

Throughout it all, God in Jesus never leaves our side. “Do not be afraid,” he whispers to us. “Do not be afraid. I not only love you. I not only forgive you. I not only claim you. I want you to work for me.”

I’ve long held this idea that Peter was chosen by Jesus despite his flaws. But what if he was chosen because of his flaws? Because of his brokenness. Because of his disarming honesty.

Perhaps broken people make the best disciples, the best fishers of people, the best savers of men and women alive. According to this story, those who seek to heal the spirit need not be perfect. Their own need for healing is part of what allows them to become agents of grace to others.

I’m reminded of a line from a Leonard Cohen song:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in.²

I don’t need to say it, do I? If Jesus can make good use of Peter, then surely he can make good use of us. Jesus can make good use of all of us. Not despite our failings but because of them.

God in Jesus will yet use our brokenness to share the light of God’s grace with a world in need.

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in.

Amen.

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, WJK, 2009, p.335

² Leonard Cohen Anthem lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC