

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Killeen, Texas

February 10, 2019

I like Luke's version of the abundant catch of fish. It just makes more sense than the other one where Jesus told Peter and his friends to cast their net on the other side of the boat. If you're a fish, you can't tell one side of a boat from the other, so that story is mostly about breaking the disciples out of old habits. In Luke's version, however, the disciples are told something entirely different: to head out into the risky, deep waters, where there's a different kind of fishing entirely.

Shallow or deep has a lot more going on than one side or the other because "deep" is the natural language of human relationships, one of Jesus' most vital concerns. We call relationships deep when people know things about each other that aren't general knowledge leading to trust, real understanding, and the ability to touch one another's hearts and change at a profound level.

That's what Jesus had in mind when he told the disciples that in the future they would be fishing for people. He wanted his disciples to reach others at a deep level where they longed for meaning and salvation and for the healing of their emotional and spiritual wounds. To reach people at this depth would require spiritual intimacy and love.

To be such a disciple involves willingness to risk the deep waters. Jesus' disciples would not be mere rabble-rousers, sloganeers, haranguers of the excitable masses. Jesus' real disciples would not win followers by promising them prosperity in return for their donations. No, Jesus' disciples will sit down face to face with people to enter their deepest pain and fears, to share, and pray, and open up to God and heal and hope.

That meant that the disciples themselves would have to go into their own deepest hopes and fears, for how can you expect such vulnerability from others if you have not gone there yourself? Resist it though they might, the first disciples would have to experience the pain and grief of the cross. They would suffer the death of all hope, God's own extinction before their eyes. Then would come the rebirth of holiness and hope, at first in the person of Jesus in his resurrection, and then in the rousing of the Holy Spirit from deep within their own souls.

Only with this willingness to journey through pain and loss and return to life can a person do the work that Jesus needs done. When somebody stares you in the eye after confessing their pain and says, "Why, then, should I hope?" the credible response must come from similar depth of experience. Furthermore, the credible answer is also grounded in the knowledge that the disciple still has fears, may face the journey into crucifixion again, and for whom hope, therefore, remains a live issue. The disciple is not somebody who has had one experience in the deep water and returns to the shallow to take hopes and fears for granted, having checked off that box.

This story is about evangelism, of course, about fishing souls up and bringing them to God. Yet the famous line "fishers of men" (or of people, if you will) has been

repeated so often that it, too, has become a mere slogan, and a shallow one at that. We are tempted to think of it in terms of mere change of circumstances – turning a non-attender into somebody who comes to church.

No, Jesus is interested in depth, the turning of hearts and souls and minds to God, not just bodies for the pews. Jesus needs disciples who row out into the deep water and fish for souls where the real need is not recruitment but personal transformation. I'm reminded of a brief vignette from an old V.S. Naipaul story about an immigrant who has just come into the United States from India back in the 1950's. The poor man had been brought over as an indentured servant and was living in a single tiny room beneath a flight of stairs in the house he served.

Completely unaware of the customs of his new land as he took a walk one day, he went utterly off the rails when somebody asked the question we toss off so casually, "How you doing?" He was flooded with gratitude and relief. Nobody had ever asked him that question back home. Nobody had cared. What a wonderful new land, he thought, that somebody who doesn't even know me would want to know how I'm doing. So, to the horror of the person who asked the question, he launched into a thorough, deep, honest and utterly revealing and frightening answer.

That may have been a shallow question that accidentally got a deep response, but from the point of view of evangelism, it is a model exchange. To ask, "How are you doing?" and mean it, and get a deep response, is the essence of evangelism. Real Christians are out there fishing the deep waters where people deal with what's really going on in their lives. That's where God goes to work.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not talking about sending out a bunch of people to ask, "How you doing?" like some sort of Episcopal alternative to asking if they've accepted Jesus Christ as their personal lord and savior. No, I'm talking about getting to know people. People at work, people in the neighborhood or your kids' school or anywhere you come into contact with them. Being friends with people wherever possible so that, as you get to know them better, they identify you as the sort of person they're comfortable in conversation with.

Then you won't need to come on strong with something like, "No, how are you doing, *really!!!*?" or ask them inappropriately personal questions. If they like you and trust you, they'll come to you. They'll drop hints in conversation that there's something down there in their experience that isn't at peace. Then it's up to you to try to catch it, pursue it gently, like playing a fish. Don't go too quickly or you'll scare the person off, but don't be shy or afraid to try, either.

Be patient, and willing to do a lot of listening. Calm your mind as you listen. Your natural fear of intimacy will tempt you to give the other person a flashy piece of your analysis or to offer up a quick fix. Or to tell them you know exactly how they feel and then start talking about yourself. These are all signals from your own depths that you're done listening and don't really want a serious conversation anymore, because deep down you know that the more you listen, the more responsibility you take on to be a friend, and that is a scary thing. You're in deep waters.

So, take a deep breath and keep listening, keep asking the kind of questions that communicate attention and demonstrate that you care. That is evangelism, real

evangelism, because bringing people to Jesus is about coming as Jesus with healing. As you listen, then, you can drop hints of where your hope comes from in the same way that the person dropped hints to you of some deeper need. Then, maybe, you can let the other person be the fisher, if they want to ask you questions that bring up the ways you have experienced redemption and how your faith in God is a vital part of the salvation as you have been blessed to know.

Amazing things can happen out here in the deep waters. Jesus asked fishermen, in particular, to be his evangelists for a reason. Jewish people were terrified by deep water. For people with a desert heritage, great bodies of water were horrifying leftovers from Creation itself where the spirit of God hovered over the deep and said, "Let there be light." Bodies of water like the Sea of Galilee were sheer chaos where awful things happened and people drowned, yet, at the same time, they were fertile as creation and food could be fished up from those depths. The people who sailed out there were heroes and the folks back on the shore viewed them, even the poorest of them, with a sense of awe.

Sailing out onto the waters of creation demonstrated the *attitude* of evangelism and that's why Jesus recruited them for disciples. They had the willingness to row out into chaos, even the chaos of other people's hidden lives and see it as a fertile opportunity to partner with God in the continuing work of creation.

We, you and I, have a choice. We can be just like those people who wanted to stay on the shore and not go out into the deep waters. There are a million rationalizations for avoiding evangelism, and they spring to our lips every minute of every day:

I'm too tired.

I don't have time.

The other person won't really like me.

I don't want to be embarrassed.

Surely there's somebody else who could do this better.

People don't really want to open up.

Those statements are things we may tell ourselves with great force, but they are shallow. There's no life in them. No creation. You know that God's work isn't in the shallow waters. The deep is where creation has been done from the very beginning, where life itself has been brought up from darkness to light. And here's a deeper truth: way down in our souls we *want* to partner with God in creation, we want to reach down there, deep inside of ourselves to find the courage and the resources to go where others need us the most. We all, all of us, have that impulse in our souls: a yearning to change the world for good, to bring the world to its God.

Jesus needs us to act on that that impulse, the impulse hidden inside all of us, that courageous impulse of true evangelism.

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