

Into The Deep

Luke 5:1-11

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When I read the call story this week of Simon and the other fishermen, called from their nets, I was halted by the verse where Jesus instructs the fishermen to “push out into the deep.” It’s as if they’ve been in the shallow waters long enough and have not yet discovered what life is all about. It’s as if there is something of great significance awaiting them in the deeper waters. He, of course, is inviting them into the mystery of faith.

‘Into the deep’ implies into those deep currents of faith where wisdom is found, where disciples in every generation will find what they need to make their lives meaningful. In those days, like these days, people everywhere hungered for meaning in their lives. They just weren’t satisfied by the shallow, trite, bumper sticker theologies offered up on street corners. They faced hard economic times. They faced tough medical decisions. They faced political oppression. They didn’t know what to do with loved ones who suffered with mental illness. They had teenagers who drove them up the wall. They had parents who were slow to understand. They wondered, as we do, why bad things happen to good people. They hungered for a deeper meaning and had not yet found it. Jesus understood this deeper hunger. When he invites the fishermen to put out into the deep, he is inviting them to share in a ministry that will meet people where they are in their search for meaning. **This is one way I have understood my own calling to ministry, to be with people in the deep water for as long as it takes for them to find the meaning they seek.**

In the film, Good Will Hunting, the director takes us into the privacy of the psychiatrist's office where the young man, Will, twiddles his thumbs and can't wait for each session to end. In the one, memorable session, the doctor has taken Will out to a park bench. He confronts the egocentric young man with a deep truth that everyone who seeks meaning must one day confront. It is not a truth one can discover in a textbook or in a novel or in a movie or in any place other than in one's own life experience. It is this. **One has not truly begun to live until one finds someone or something to love more than one loves one's own self.**

This is precisely where Jesus was taking the fishermen when he said 'put out into the deep.' He saw that though they had a vocation and a livelihood, they had not yet begun to live, not yet found that deeper meaning which makes life worth living. They were stuck in that shallow place where everything is perceived to revolve around them! He invites them to follow him into that deeper place where one loves beyond one's own self. This is the place of Christian discipleship. Dietrich Bonhoeffer would call this the cost of discipleship. The United Church of Christ Statement of Faith calls it the joy of discipleship. I call it the place where life begins. I know those book titles: Life Begins at Forty, Life Begins at Sixty Five, Life Begins at Eighty. I say life begins when we discover that certain someone or that certain something that calls us to love beyond our own selves.

In a way, this is what Jesus' whole life is all about, modeling the difference it makes when one takes that risk, loving beyond one's own self. It describes the leap from adolescence to adulthood. It describes the leap into sacred relationship. It describes what many would call the Realm of God.

One of the stories I have lived with and reflected on hundreds of times is John's account of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well.

It's one of those stories we encounter in Church School and then find it grows on us; it invites us into the story, making the story our own. The Samaritan woman is at the well drawing water for her household needs. Jesus comes along and asks for a cool drink. As they sip the water from the well, (another deep place by the way), they talk about their personal lives. The woman is at ease with this stranger and reveals she has had six husbands. We aren't given the full text of their dialogue, but we see that when the conversation ends, the woman is a new person. Something has happened. There is a new spring in her step. She can hardly wait to tell her neighbors about the man she met at the well. The reader is left to ponder what took place as they talked at the well. I have a strong hunch about that now. My best theological intuition tells me Jesus may have confronted her with this same truth; that life begins when one sees the wisdom of loving another person more than she loves her own self. She runs all the way back to her village and urges everyone there to come out to meet this man who has changed her life.

There is nothing wrong, of course, with loving one's self. Indeed, that is essential. But only loving one's self tends to keep us in the shallow waters where the meaning of life is illusive.

As those first fishermen became disciples, they discovered that Jesus kept taking them into deeper and deeper water. By the end of his life, he had taken them to that place I think of as Mariana's Trench, the deepest place in the deepest ocean. He had taken them to that place where meaning is found by loving one's enemy, loving the ones who are hardest to love. And that, ultimately, is where Christian discipleship takes us: from loving ourselves, to loving the ones who are easy to love, to loving the ones no one in his right mind would ever consider loving.

I've taken some long walks this week. I've reflected a great deal on when my own life really began. I was able to identify a number of times when I found myself loving someone else more than I loved myself. I'd like to end this sermon with one of those occasions. It was 1971. I was in seminary. I was doing field education at the United Methodist Church on Moody Street in Waltham, Massachusetts. I was in charge of the junior and senior high youth groups. I think it was accurate to say I was full of myself. Things were going along okay until there was an incident in the building that made me furious. Without going into the details, I'll just say that I was ready to quit that job. The adults had made me so mad, I wasn't going to let them treat me that way, I was going to show them a thing or two. I was going to resign. Then, they'd be sorry. I actually started to type out the letter of resignation when something awesome began to happen. I started seeing the faces of the youth in the two fellowship groups. Dougie Farnsworth, Cheryl Leonard, Alan Batchelder, Gail Cormier. On and on through the two groups, their faces kept appearing to me. And that's when I saw that it wasn't about me, it was about those kids; it was about loving those kids; loving them more than me. I think my ministry was born in that moment. I waded out of the shallow waters of self-love and into the deep.

To this day, when I drive to Boston, I jog one exit north on Route 128 to take the Waltham exit. I drive up Moody Street and sometimes I park across from the United Methodist Church, sort of waiting for Dougie or Cheryl to walk up the sidewalk. I want to thank them for having been so present to me that day, for being the ones who called me out into the deeper waters, to love them for awhile, even putting them ahead of myself.

It's a wonderful exercise to reflect on those times, those occasions when it seems our lives had finally begun. Usually, they have something to do with moving out into the deep. This is how the text was speaking to me this week. And as always, I share it with you in the greatest of hope. Amen.