

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
February 6, 2022
Isaiah 6:1-8 (-13)
Psalm 138
1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Luke 5:1-11

A Big Catch in Deep Water

Last week after things went a bit sideways on his visit back home in Nazareth, Jesus, in a jujitsu-style move exited a crowd intent on killing him and continued on his own way—his own way of life and peace.

From that point to where today's gospel picks up, we have skipped over all the rest of Luke chapter 4, verses in which, after leaving Nazareth, Jesus resumes the preaching tour of his home region of Galilee. This is what he was doing between his temptations vision quest in the desert and his visit home, and it's what he returns to after his home folks seek to do away with him. And, after a few more stops in Galilee, he ventures farther south into Judea, the region of Jerusalem, as well.

He stops in various places and teaches. At some point he comes back north to Galilee again. Today we find he has returned to Capernaum, a fishing village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, a lake sometimes called Gennesaret. A big crowd gathers, as has become the norm, and he's squeezed in on all sides. To make space for himself and his message, he asks to borrow a boat and turns it into a floating pulpit. Well, kinda. Generally, one stands in a pulpit as I do here. Jesus, however, sits in the boat to preach and teach, just as he and others would and did sit in a synagogue to preach and teach.

The boat belongs to Simon, soon to be Peter, and his brother Andrew. They are homeboys from Capernaum. Fishing is what they do. Fishing is what they know, and they know how to do it. Simon is probably fine with Jesus borrowing their boat while they mend their nets and square things away. He and Andrew are exhausted though. They've fished all night and have nothing to show for it. It seems to me Simon shows remarkable restraint when this son of a carpenter gives him advice on fishing, telling him to put out again after having pulled an all nighter.

Simon explains their bad luck and their fatigue. And he's willing to give it a go anyway because it's Jesus who suggests it. But why is he willing to take advice from Jesus?

Simon doesn't yet know what we know about Jesus. And he doesn't yet know what he himself will know soon enough about Jesus.

So why is he willing to take the advice of a carpenter and a carpenter's son about fishing, the thing he knows so well, the thing on which his livelihood depends?

Answer: relationship.

It's not their first meeting. In those verses of Luke 4 that are in between last week's gospel and today's, we find yet another visit to Capernaum. Jesus preaches in the synagogue there, heals a man on the sabbath in the synagogue, gets run off on account of it, and winds up at Simon's house.

Simon's mother-in-law has a fever, and Jesus heals her of it. She makes supper for all of them. And then on the Capernaum version of the coconut telegraph the whole town hears what Jesus did for Simon's mother-in-law, and the whole town shows up outside Simon's door.

Everybody comes for the impromptu event, and everyone who is sick with anything who is brought to him is healed by Jesus. And, at daybreak, he slips off on his own to rest and recharge and pray. And everyone comes looking for him again. And Jesus tells them he has to keep on moving to other places.

So, back at the side of the lake, when Jesus asks to turn his boat into a floating pulpit and after teaching a crowd on the shore of the lake proceeds to give advice on fishing, Simon already has a relationship with Jesus. They have shared at least one meal together in Simon's house, and Jesus has spent the night with Simon and his family. In this gospel today, which is Luke's version of the calling of Simon and Andrew and also James and John, the Zebedee boys, they are not laying eyes on Jesus for the first time. Rather, they are building on previous interactions. They are deepening their relationship.

Simon and Andrew are willing to take the advice of a carpenter regarding fishing because they already know that he is more than a carpenter, and they know that he is on their side.

What will you do for the sake of, at the suggestion of, on the advice of someone you know is on your side? For someone who is proven to be your advocate, someone you know has your back and your best interest at heart?

The foundation of belonging and friendship, real relational connection, are there for Jesus and Simon and by extension for Andrew, Simon's brother.

Relationship is one of our greatest resources as well as one of our greatest joys in congregational life. As we build capacity across the many domains of our life together, we are also building trust and transparency and accountability in everything. Increasingly, we know and see that we can rely on one another to take care of our respective parts in our life together.

As our sister Episcopalian Brené Brown teaches, even preaches, so eloquently, we humans are hard-wired for love and connection. We want to connect and really belong somewhere. And belonging is different from just "fitting in," just as friendship is different from friendliness.

How can we foster the kinds of connection and companionship that give meaning and purpose to our everyday lives as people of St Paul's and also assist us in building capacity in everything as we anticipate new and renewed ministries, a capital campaign for the total restoration of the buildings of this campus, and so on?

Everyone is known fully and beloved by God, and we live best and thrive most when we are not only connected to God and God's acceptance but also known and received and embraced by one another, when we are willing to be vulnerable with one another.

That's hard to build in a crowd. It's good to come together, as we have in this moment, live here in person or for some by livestream. But we also make different kinds of connections in smaller configurations. Often groups of six or eight seem to work well. What if we had more small groups?

What would those small groups look like? Are we talking about formation opportunities such as Sacred Ground and Education for Ministry? In a way, yes.

Are we talking about the groups of people who take on certain ministries and responsibilities such as vestry, altar guild, lay readers, eucharistic ministers, building and grounds volunteers, and board trustees? In a way, yes.

And, we are also talking about fellowship pure and simple with no other purpose than spending time together. Companionship, literally, breaking bread together. Companions are the people we share bread with. Knowing and being known as the only agenda with a small group of people you kind of know but are getting to know better.

There are a few ways that we could organize such groups, probably six to eight people, so stay tuned for more on those developing opportunities. And if you are not quite sure about what you think about being assigned to some random group of people, let your heart be comforted by this most Anglican of responses: “All may; some should; none must.”

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So, relationship is why Simon and Andrew would take Jesus’ advice and follow his suggestion. But still, when we are exhausted and asked to do more, even by someone we love and respect, that’s a hard sell, isn’t it?

Because Jesus doesn’t just say go back and try again tonight. He says go back right now. And he says push out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch.

If you’re accustomed to fishing at night, it’s counterintuitive to go out in the full light of day. If you’re accustomed to fishing in shallower spots, it doesn’t necessarily sound right to go deep.

The invitation from Jesus to Simon and Andrew is to try doing something very familiar in a different way. They are willing to give it a go because they know Jesus is for real. He is reliable and trustworthy.

They do what Jesus says, and they are overwhelmed with the results. They experience the kind of awe that Isaiah describes in the first reading: amazement and wonder when encountering the Holy One of Israel, the Ancient of Days. That overwhelm that leads us to say, “O my God, you are my God; I don’t know what to do in response to you.” And the great I AM who rendered Isaiah speechless in the temple in a time of deep disruption after King Uzziah had died is the same Holy One in human form encountered by Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John as Jesus the Christ. Epiphany, again.

How about us? The call to us in this moment is similar. Are we willing to do something familiar in a different way? Are we willing to go out into deep water, to risk something big for something really good?

Where is the deep water for us? It's been a long season these past two years. Unsettling, unpredictable, unsafe, unwelcome in many, many ways. Long, hard, exhausting, difficult. We may feel in spite of our best efforts we don't have much to show for all our labor.

And yet we are called, still and yet, to stay at it. And not only to keep doing the same things but also to do things at least a little differently and in some cases very differently. Where is the deep water for us, for you, for me? Where is God calling us to go fishing? And what do you imagine we may catch, what abundance may fill our nets, as we follow Jesus and venture into deep water as companions together?