



"Going Deeper"

Scripture – Luke 5:1-11

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, February 13, 2022

How many of you have ever fished? Growing up in Oklahoma, where there are numerous lakes, it was the chief bonding activity with my dad and my Grandfather Knox. Grandfather owned a small, no frills cabin in the woods. It had a cement floor, cinderblock walls and one large room that served as the family room, dining room, kitchen, and at night, bedroom. It was primitive, but to a young boy, it was perfect.

It was located a few hundred yards from the majestic and exceptionally clear Lake Tenkiller. The lake was named after a prominent Cherokee family who sold the land to the government. Then the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built a dam on the Illinois River to generate hydroelectric power, to control flooding, and to create a good water supply. Of course, I did not know any of that as a kid. I just knew it was an amazing place to swim, skip rocks, and fish.

Anyone who fishes knows there are exciting occasions when you have a successful catch and disappointing days when you come up empty. In today's passage, a handful of men had one of those frustrating days when they fished all night, but had nothing to show for it other than aching muscles. So, they had sailed their two boats to shore and were cleaning the nets. They were probably exhausted, cursing their rotten luck, and preparing to hobble home to catch some sleep.

A few yards away, a crowd began to gather. A man near the edge of the water began to speak and people drew nearer to hear what he had to say. The fisherman did not recognize him, but the listeners kept inching closer until he had nearly backed into the water. So the man asked one of the fisherman if he could climb into his boat and shove out a few yards from shore to use it as a floating pulpit. The fisherman, named Simon, obliged. He welcomed the man who called himself Jesus into his boat. Then Simon positioned his boat a few feet from shore where the crowd could hear Jesus speak.

For some reason our gospel writer does not tell us what Jesus said. Was it because his message was not memorable? Believe me, I know what those days feel like! You give it your all and then, thud. Nothing inspiring pours from your lips. It is comforting for preachers to imagine that Jesus might have had a day like that, too.

But we don't really know if that happened to Jesus. What we do know is that when he finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Push out farther where it's deeper, and throw your nets out." Simon apparently thought to himself, "What does this teacher know about fishing? He replied to Jesus, "We have been fishing hard all night and have not landed even a minnow."

It is not possible to tell from the text, but I'm guessing that at that moment there was an awkward silence. Simon stubbornly resisting the advice of Jesus while Jesus wore a beatific grin and possessed a non-anxious presence that said, "I have all day."

Simon blinked first and the stand-off ended. "All right. If you say so, I'll throw out the nets; but only once!"

He heaved the nets overboard, and they slowly sank. When Simon gave a tug to haul the nets back onboard he snagged so many fish the nets were stretched to their limits. He signaled his friends on shore, who quickly sailed out to help with the catch of a lifetime. Luke tells us that the boats were so brimming with fish that they began to sink.

Well, I've heard some fanciful fish tales in my life, but they all pale in comparison to this one! However, the legendary catch is not really the point of the story. Focus on Simon's reaction to his finest day on the water. We might expect him to say, "Boys, tonight we celebrate and the first round is on me!" But instead, he turned to Jesus. And what did he say? Did he beg Jesus to come fishing with him again?

Hardly. He fell to his knees and said, "Get away!"

Undeterred, Jesus responded, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be fishing for men and women."

The text informs us that two of the fisherman were brothers – James and John. And after Jesus said he had new work for them, they brought their boats to shore, left everything, and followed him.

As you know, this story is not really about fishing. It's about something deeper. It's about *going* deeper. It's not about what Simon, James, and John did for a living, but about what makes life *worth* living. Jesus showed Simon and his friend – Jesus shows *us* – that when we go deeper, life is brimming.

Trust me, Jesus says. Trust me when I call for you to cast nets even to places you have already tried. Trust me, Jesus says. Trust me by following me, and I will show you how to catch people.

A colleague (Amy Miracle) points out that the phrase about catching people is not really a very good translation of the Greek. It's too mild. A more accurate translation is 'you will be saving men and women alive.' The Greek verb describes rescue from the peril of death and hopelessness...This is about helping people; helping them live the fullest life possible."¹

What Simon and the other disciples will learn – and what we learn – is if you follow Jesus, you will discover the importance and the power of love.

Lutheran pastor Peter Marty remembers being interviewed for his first congregation. The last question he was asked has stayed with him for years. "Peter, do you love people?"

Peter says it sounded disingenuous and felt as if the questioner was setting a trap. He cannot remember his precise response, but it was some variation of "You bet I love people!" It was more cheer than nuance, because he felt annoyed that anyone would infer that a pastor might not love people. He received the call to the congregation, but that question has never stopped rolling around in his head.²

Do *you* love people or are they a means to an end? How do you respond to those closest to you? With empathy or compassion fatigue? How do you treat fellow workers? How do you react to the clerk in the checkout line? Annoyed that she's not quicker or sympathetic to her monotonous job?

Theologian Anthony de Mellow wrote, "Sometimes people want to imitate Christ, but when a monkey plays a saxophone, that doesn't make him a musician. You cannot imitate Christ by imitating his external behavior. You must *be* Christ. [That is, not simply imitating outward actions, but having the Spirit of Christ within you. That will guide you in how Jesus might act if he were here today. That will help you know what to do in a particular situation.] Continuing with DeMello, "If you believe that compassion implies softness, (you do not really understand) compassion, because compassion can be very hard. Compassion can be confrontational; compassion can roll up its sleeves and operate on you. Compassion is all kinds of things. It can be very soft, but there's no way of knowing that. It is only when you *become* love...that you will know (what to do)."³

People who think that following Jesus is primarily about believing certain church doctrines completely fail to understand what it means to be Christ to a hurting world. Jesus was a man of action who expected his followers to carry on his mission after he was no longer physically present.

When Simon, James, and John dropped their nets to follow this compelling man, they dropped their narrowly defined identity – simply fisherman – to broaden and expand their identity. As they listened to Jesus and as they watched Jesus interact with others, they gradually understood what it meant to *be* Christ. It means to extend compassion, to resist evil, to strive for justice, to forgive, to work for the common good. To be Christ means many things, but in the end it is to love as Christ loved.

Presbyterian pastor, Tom Are, went on a mission trip to Kenya with members of his congregation. He "met Rachel there, a nurse who is a Christian. She was among the women who got up before the sun to heat water so that the visitors from America might have warm showers. She then joined the women in the cook house to prepare breakfast for their guest over an open fire. She joined the group at the health clinic where she served as a nurse all day and then returned to the cook house to prepare the evening meal, which was a feast every day. Tom said, "Rachel, you are taking such good care of us. You are working so hard." She said, "Pastor Tom, that is how we treat family."⁴

Maybe that's the key to being Christ – to treat others like family. Or, maybe even better: like a guest.

NOTES

1. Amy Miracle quoting from *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2, in "Deep Water," February 10, 2019.
2. Peter W. Marty, "Do You Love People," in *Christian Century*, October 4, 2011, p.10.
3. Anthony de Mellow, "Being a Changed Person."
4. Tom Are, "The Labor that Grows Out of Love: Follow the Dots," November 14, 2021.