

St. Paul's Congregational Church
February 10, 2019
Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Do you remember when you were a little kid taking swimming lessons for the first time? The gospel reading today somehow reminded me of my first experience at a community swimming pool back in Farmington. We started out in the shallow end of the pool – learning to float, to breathe, maybe graduating to the dog paddle. We could always put our feet down when we got nervous, or when we needed to wipe all that water out of our eyes – we knew there was a foundation under us. But then came the day when the teacher took us to the deep end of the pool – we were supposed to swim across the pool – it wasn't very far – we could do any stroke we wanted to – this was the big day when we got to swim in the grown-up end of the pool. Well, when it was my turn I set out, scared to death, and about 5 feet into it, tried to put my feet down and of course I couldn't touch the bottom. I think I was the only one in the class who had to be fished out by the lifeguard. Talk about being discouraged and frightened – it was years before I tried that again.

Today's gospel reading is about 3 discouraged men – 4 if you count Andrew, Simon Peter's brother who appears in other accounts of this story.

They were fishermen – not recreational fishermen – but workers whose families went hungry if there was no catch. Jesus had met them before when they were associated with John the Baptist – when he'd been to Simon Peter's house and cured his mother-in-law of a high fever.

It was a bad time for these fishermen – they'd fished all night and caught nothing. Now it was the morning after a night of failure and they were washing and repairing their nets so they'd be ready for the next nights' work.

There was a crowd on the beach near where they were working. A big crowd. The crowd was listening to Jesus – pushing in upon him. Jesus is in the water, out away from the crowd. Suddenly Jesus steps into Simon's boat and asks him to put out a little way from shore. And Peter does it.

From the boat Jesus continues to teach the crowds. Finally he is done. The crowd goes home.

Jesus then turns to Simon – put out into the deep water, he tells him. And let your nets down for a catch.

Now, here's Jesus, a landsman, telling a professional fisherman how to do his business. A little wierd, isn't it – Peter answers Jesus right away by explaining the facts of life to him. It won't do any good – he says. We have worked all night – we've caught nothing – there's no point to it.

Have you ever been there? You do your best. You work hard. And the results are zero. The harder you try, the less you produce. I know this sounds familiar to each of us – haven't you ever been in a place where all your wisdom tells you – just give up? I have, and the last thing we need to hear when we are in this position is “try harder.” That can just shut us down, can't it.

Peter and Andrew, James and John, they were not stupid men. They knew the lake, the ledges where the fish gathered, the kind of weather and the time of day when it was most likely to get a good catch. Their families had been working the lake for generations – but they did all they knew and came up empty.

Jesus says – try over there. Over there in the deep water – let your nets down for a catch. “Master, we have worked all night long” – Peter says. “We have done everything we should have done, everything we were taught to do by our fathers and their fathers before them. But we have caught nothing.” But then he says, “Yet...if you say so – I will do it and let down the nets.”

Why he agrees to do this we don't know. Maybe he did it because he was learning to trust Jesus. Maybe he did it to humor him – I'll show you – it won't work. Maybe it was because of something in Jesus' tone of voice. Whatever the reason, Peter agrees to do what Jesus asks of him.

We know the story from here – they threw the nets out from Simon's boat and took in so many fish that their nets break; when John and James came alongside and helped load the catch – the boats began to sink.

It was an amazing catch – a catch made in deep water, taken where and when there should have been no catch. A catch counter to everything the culture knew and taught.

So, let's look today at the catch of fish – the facts behind it, and what the whole episode might suggest about how we live our lives, both individually and as a community of faith.

Let's remember what Simon said to Jesus – “Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything.”

What he was saying might have been familiar to us: I know my business. We've already tried that. It didn't work. We worked all night and nothing happened – what's the point?

We, like Peter, know our business too – don't we. Maybe we know it too well. But what happens? We feel frustrated. We feel inadequate. We feel alone. We believe that what is being asked of us either as individuals or as a group will not pan out – and we don't want to try again – we don't want to risk one more disappointment. We don't want to go deep – to the deep end of the pool because we're afraid. We're afraid we won't make it. We're afraid we'll look foolish. We're afraid of yet another failure.

I know people whose lives are miserable because for years and years they're refused to risk failure – such terrible disappointment. What's the use, they say – it won't work. I can't change. Nothing will change.

What a depressing way to live!

People have resources but don't use them. They have skills but don't develop them. Dreams but don't follow them. Gifts, but don't share them. They know their business and they are not about to be taught by anyone else. And they know what the situation is – and they are locked in by that knowledge. Afraid to risk. Afraid to reach out. Afraid to go beyond the familiar because in the end they think they know how things will work out.

But Jesus tells us to go deep. Put out into the deep water – and let down your nets.

A minister tells the story of his work in a small town in Canada – a young woman suggested to the Church Council there that they start a social club – one that could meet one Friday a month for special events like bowling, rotation dinners, card parties, tobogganing, theater, events like that.

Guess what the council said? You know.....

“We tried it before and it didn't work.”

And they were right – they had tried it. They had done their best several times in recent years and it didn't work. Nobody was interested. Nobody came.

But, to their credit, the council said, if she wanted to try it again – that was up to her. She had their blessing, but they also warned her not to be disappointed if nothing happened.

In those days the church had an average Sunday attendance of about 85 – forty of those folks were approaching or past retirement age, and about 30 were children. The first meeting of the new club had 10 people there. The second had 16. And they were all people between the ages of 18 and 40. The group continued for some time – they had a great time together and because of that time together many other lives in the community were touched. Everyone became more alive – more confident – more united. And church attendance rose in part due to the success of this group.

Go deep. Put out into deep waters and let your nets down for a while. And trust the spirit.

Sometimes we need to be stimulated by someone who lives outside our frame of reference. Sometimes we need to listen to another point of view. Sometimes we need to risk one more failure. Sometimes we need to go and do what our common sense tells us can't be done and to try it anyway. Sometimes we just need to head out into deeper waters and let down our nets for no better reason than Jesus has asked us to do so. Just like Peter did.

I've always liked Simon Peter – he's so like each of us, isn't he. He struggles with his discipleship just like we do. Sometimes he's right on the mark, sometimes he misses the point, sometimes he even denies knowing Jesus. But Jesus is so patient with him – in spite of some harsh words throughout the gospels – Jesus never gives up on him, does he - even with all his stubbornness, his slowness to “get the point”, Jesus sees through all that and re-names him Peter – upon this rock I will build my church. Why is that? Because more often than not, Peter comes through – willing to set the familiar aside and try new waters. Just because Jesus tells him to.

I've been remembering all those Church Annual Meetings I've attended – that great congregational tradition of combining the business of the church with a celebration of our life together. Every church these days has their challenges but they also have the celebrations: and too often the challenges tend to outweigh the celebrations.

I've asked members of confirmation classes to attend annual meetings - and then to complete a report on their observations. For many of the class and for many of us as well, it can be a boring activity indeed – lots of talking about stuff they, us, don't understand. As preparation for the meeting I usually go over the budget – what the line items mean, what we're going to be talking about at the meeting. There's almost always at least one confirmand who has an epiphany – that somebody has to pay the light or heating bill, that the pastors and the rest of the staff really are paid to do their jobs – we're not volunteers, nor do we live at the church. And they are often surprised at how many people we need to volunteer to do the various tasks necessary for an active church. That's why I also require them to participate in the life of the church through doing service projects – they find out how much work it really does take to make activities happen, that letters do have to be hand stuffed in envelopes, address labels attached to them before they're brought to the post office. There's a wide variety of ways they participate in the daily activity of the church through the year – and most of them find out, one, how much fun they can have working on these projects,

and two, how much work really is involved. It's a great way to combine the being and doing of our faith for them. And for all of us as well.

Then at the class following the meeting, we take some time to go over their reports – including questions like what was most interesting, most boring, what they'd learned about our church at the meeting, what they'd do differently if they were running the meeting – and what surprised them about the meeting. Many of the answers were what you'd expect – all the talk about money was boring. All the speeches were too long. But there were a couple that stood out to me – one spoke of wishing there was more celebration of our life together. She had some great ideas and I will certainly pass them on. But one was especially profound: one confirmand said, "I was surprised by how little more it would take from each of us to make this good church a great church." That led to a great conversation about Sunday School collections, how much they brought each week – or didn't bring each week, how many service projects they'd done or hadn't done.

Listen to that comment again: how little it would take from each of us to make this good church a great church. Those are the words of young people – young people who aren't stuck in the way we've always done things, who see this good church with new eyes and who see the promise of being a great church. I'm certainly not advocating throwing aside tradition – just for the sake of doing that. But I am impressed with their insights into the willingness to take a risk to try new waters – to go deep. I do hope we can nurture that in each other as we continue to face all the joys and challenges we share. I do hope we'll encourage each other to express our thoughts and ideas – joys and concerns – I do hope we'll listen to each other and work hard to not immediately shut down a proposal to move out into deeper waters. The work, the ministry - including all the joys, sorrows, challenges, celebrations, normal everyday activities of all institutions, the work of this church just like all churches continues.

As those fishermen found out, doing deeper brought them abundance they'd never, ever expected. Doing what it is that Jesus called them to do brought them riches they'd never thought would come. And so it is for us. Jesus came so that each one of us might have abundant life, a full and rich life, a life in which we know and experience and share the love of God – a love that conquers the sting of death, and ensures that in the end our labors aren't in vain, no matter how many days our nets may come up empty. And to assure that life, we, like Peter, have to recognize that our knowledge and our experience is not equal to that of God. We have to recognize that God's ways really are superior to our own, that God's wisdom is greater, God's

timing is better – God’s counsel more life-giving than our own. We must acknowledge our need and God’s ability and desire to meet that need.

Our nets may come up empty for many days in a row – but if we are open to God – if we are willing to listen and try the new things God suggests – if we are willing to venture out into the deep water – or even if we are willing, because God asks us, to do over again some of the things we’ve tried before and given up on, our nets will in the end be filled – and filled so abundantly that they will threaten to break.

God is able to speak through us – God is able to make our nets overflow. God is able to bring good news to the world through us – God is able and willing to help us – God wants to help us - and God calls us to share that message – that message of abundance from where before there was nothing.

So let’s go out into the deep end of the pool together – let’s catch each other when we flounder – let’s heed that outrageous call God makes to each of us into a fullness of life we never thought possible – a life individually and together where God’s will is done. Let’s spread the nets and trust the spirit – together. Amen!