

Deep Water

Ever have one of those days? Where everything goes wrong; you work hard, you try to stay focused, but you just can't seem to catch a break? That's where Simon, James and John were when Jesus shows up, end of shift, and it has not been a good one. Every fisherman knows what it feels like to get skunked, but for most of us it's just a hobby, for these guys it was their livelihood. When I go out fishing, I like to catch things, but I mostly throw them back, and if I don't catch anything I can think of worse ways to spend a few hours. For these guys it meant going home empty-handed to wives and families that were counting on them.

Along comes Jesus, tra-la-la, "hey mind if I sit in your boat?" I can almost hear Simon mutter under his breath, "Yeah, whatever, I got stuff to do, just try not to sink it and drown." Jesus sits and talks to the crowd while Simon and the others are working, cleaning up the nets, and getting ready to go home and sleep, but before they go, he says, "take the boat out to the deep water, and you'll catch something." As tired as they are they realize that Jesus must be somebody, because he's got this crowd following him, but they also know that his advice is stupid, that's not how the kind of fishing they do works. The whole process is about shallow water, where they drag their nets through the warm, food rich water where the fish come to feed and where they can trap them in their nets. Out in the deep water there might be shoals of fish, but their nets aren't really going to be much use out there, the fish would just swim around them or under them. Jesus obviously doesn't understand fishing, bless his heart.

But they do it anyway, even though it doesn't make much sense, and it's probably futile, they go out to the deep water. And, as you know, they catch fish, lots of them, too many in fact, the nets start to break and the boats start to sink, it's more than they can handle. It's such an overwhelming experience that Simon, James and John leave everything and follow Jesus, and they become "fishers of men."

I have heard this metaphor used for the church, and I think it's a good one. In this era of history that we are living through, doing this church thing often feels like fishing all night and catching nothing. It's us out here in the boat, doing the things that we have always done, doing the things we know somehow should work. And it gets frustrating when the fish/people just don't seem to want to be caught. We have a couple of possible choices: work longer and harder, or just pack it up and go home. Sometimes you get to a place where packing it in seems like the thing to do, maybe not forever, but at least for now. Time to mend the nets and get ready for the next night. That seems like the two places that I see churches going, or getting pulled. It's the tension I have felt for pretty much my whole career: more frantic futility or just give up already, it's not a good choice.

There is a third possibility though: the deep water. It's not where we've been taught to go, it's not where we're comfortable, it defies conventional wisdom. Conventional wisdom tells us that people like shallow, they like entertaining, they like accessible, friendly, down to earth, simple and safe, and so churches have slaved away in the shallows, because they make sense and that seems to be what our methods and tools are designed for... but what if they're not. What if we are supposed to be in the deep water? What if we are supposed to be in those places where the conventional wisdom fails? What if we are supposed to stand in the valley of the shadow of death? What if we are to be in the places where life drives people out of their comfortable shallow places? Can we claim that space? Or are we afraid of it like everyone else?

Psalm 42 says “Deep calls to deep.” I am convinced that, if the church is going to survive we have to go deep, we cannot be afraid of the depth, we cannot keep to the shallows any longer, we may eke out a living, but we will not be doing what Christ calls us to do. If the shallows are the wrong place, then bait-fishing is the wrong method. If we go out into the deep, but are only there to get our hooks in people, we are not doing what Jesus taught us. We need to be here in the deep, our presence here is important. The deep is where people encounter God, particularly in those deep moments of life, when grief strikes, when loneliness closes in, when the need for a genuine community presses people together.

One of the reasons I think churches struggle these days is that mucking about in the shallows or casting around with bait is not authentic to our calling, and folks, thanks to decades of being saturated with advertising, are not only tired of beings sold and told things, they are actually growing immune to it. Every so often there is a church commercial on the TV, and I try to prepare myself, but I can’t help but just cringe at them. And it’s not always because they’re objectively bad, the United Methodists have done some really quite poignant ones over the past few years, but I just don’t think that it can ever escape the judgment that it is selling something that should not and really cannot be sold.

Sure you can sell your church, but should you? Jesus had crowds of people following him around, but he calls the three guys that aren’t actually paying him that much attention, and he gets their attention by showing them something that impacts their lives. The impact of a good catch would be one thing, but that isn’t the whole story now is it? What he shows them is that their whole way of thinking is wrong and that they have access to something deep. They are not disciple material, yet they are called, because they have something that Jesus understands and sees when no one else does.

We have to take the way that Jesus lived as seriously as we take his death and resurrection. We have perhaps spent so much time focusing on Jesus as Savior that we didn’t really grab a hold of him as an example, a teacher, one who calls us to follow him. I know, salvation, heaven, forgiveness of sins, all seem like deep water, but maybe it has become a little fished out. Don’t get me wrong, that’s an important part of our faith and it gives us a very resilient kind of hope, but we need to incorporate Jesus’ way of living into what we are or else it just becomes another form of delayed gratification where we end up trying to manipulate an angry God into letting us into heaven.

What Jesus shows us consistently is that God can be trusted to love us, and lead us in the way everlasting. What I think we have gotten away from is clearly showing our transformed lives, that part at the end of this passage, “they left everything and followed him,” is a huge lead in to the story of the disciples, which becomes the story of the church. It is a story of transformation, of learning to see things differently, of learning to accept the possibilities of the deep water. The story here is not the catching of fish, but the changing of lives. Simon, James and John started that day as frustrated fishermen, they ended the day as disciples of Jesus. It wasn’t because they suddenly developed a vision of heaven, or understood God’s nature, it was because they learned to trust Jesus. As the Psalm said, “deep calls to deep,” God’s love connects with us, Jesus’ life shows us what that connection looks like. It looks like a man who will point people who think they know what they are doing in a direction they didn’t expect.