

“JUST MERCY: GOING DEEPER”

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Isaiah 6:6-12
Luke 5:1-11

February 10, 2019

In our Gospel lesson, we are introduced to a group of first-century fishermen who just completed a long night of fishing on the Sea of Galilee. We discover that it was a bad night for fishing, and the fishermen have absolutely nothing to show for their hours of work. As the fishermen engage in the daily task of cleaning out and caring for their nets, it's obvious the men are tired and hungry and disappointed. I imagine they are not looking forward to going home with no fish for their families to eat, no fish to sell so that other household supplies and food can be purchased. I imagine them quite frustrated by their lack of success and grouchy – an attitude not uncommon when determination and hard work lead to nothing.

It is at this point when the fishermen are lacking sleep, success and breakfast that Jesus approaches them and asks them to do something for him. He needs a boat to put out a little way from the shore so that he might better teach the large number of people gathering on the beach. I don't imagine those tired fishermen excited about the request, but whether it was simple curiosity, a sense of intrigue about Jesus and the growing crowd, or simply an excuse to delay going home with the bad news of failure and nothing to eat, the fishermen agree to Jesus' request. Luke doesn't tell us what Jesus said to the crowd of people from the boat that day, apparently, what he said is not the point of the story. The point comes after the teaching is done, and when Jesus says, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." (Luke 5:4) Simon Peter expresses initial hesitation about this request based on their earlier failure and their current state of fatigue, but something about Jesus had touched Peter's heart and imagination and he is willing to do whatever Jesus asks.

So, the boat carrying Simon Peter and Jesus heads out to sea. They let down their nets and they catch "so many fish that their nets were beginning to break." (Luke 5:6) They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help; both boats ended up so filled with fish that sinking was a concern. It was the catch of a lifetime! It was a miraculous experience of God's abundance, and Peter fell down at Jesus' knees knowing that he was a sinful man in the presence of God. We are told that all the fishermen were "amazed" by what happened. And yet, what happened next was perhaps even more astonishing. Even though those fishermen had in their hands the best catch of their lives, and while the temptation would have been to bask in their unexpected fortune and to head home for a feast with their families that is not what happened. Those fishermen left everything right there on the beach – boats, nets, fish – and they followed Jesus.

That day was defining for those fishermen, but it could have been otherwise. If those discouraged fishermen had chosen home and rest over fishing with Jesus, they would have missed out on an amazing opportunity to witness Jesus' power. Because they responded positively to Jesus an even bigger and more demanding invitation was extended to them, one that involved following Jesus and catching people. They couldn't know what all that meant at this point, but they had learned something of the importance of saying "yes" and going deep.

Their decision to follow Jesus was the start of a movement – a movement that would grow and build and continue for the next 200 centuries. As those who have also stood at the lakeshore and been given the opportunity to follow Jesus and to

catch people, we are the ones who continue the legacy they began – the legacy of going out into the deep of this world and fishing with the Good News of Jesus Christ. And how exciting it is when ministry goes well and people respond to the message. But here's the reality check. More often than not, we come to the lakeshore feeling more like the discouraged fishermen before their encounter with Jesus. We feel tired and frustrated about what's happening right now, and we are filled with uncertainty about the future. If the job of followers is to fish, it doesn't seem like we are having much success these days.

Since 1964, the United Methodist church has experienced about a 30% decline in membership despite an almost 55% population increase. Yes, the United Methodist church is growing in Africa and parts of Asia, but the overall story is one of decrease. We are facing many challenges, but isn't it also true that with challenge comes opportunity. As those followers of Jesus Christ who make up the church universal, and specifically this church in Chagrin Falls, we must respond to these challenges in bold and relevant ways – in other words, we need to embrace the opportunity of going deeper with Jesus. Like those first disciples, we need to venture into deeper waters than we are accustomed to – waters in which we do not typically go, perhaps have never gone.

To fish with Jesus is to realize that staying in shallow, safe water will never result in a tremendous catch. It is simply not good enough to fish in the same places we have always fished, and to fish in the same way we have always fished. What little experience I've had with fishing in my lifetime was limited to a small lake, and to the using of an old pole with worms as bait. I know little about the type of equipment and the kind of bait that is best used for different types of fishing, but there are passionate, experienced fishermen and women who know such things. They know that river fishing is different than lake fishing, and lake fishing is different than ocean fishing, and they know that those differences mean fishing styles, equipment and bait all need to be adjusted accordingly.

I openly admit that I am content with my limited fishing knowledge and experience, and I have no real desire to expand that knowledge and experience. But as followers of Jesus we must not be content with limited knowledge and experience. We must not be content with fishing only in places where we are comfortable and only with equipment and bait in which we are familiar. As fishermen and fisherwomen, we must follow Jesus into deeper waters and take with us the message of Christ in new, bold and relevant ways for today.

So, as individuals and as a church, how do you think we're doing at fishing? Back in the 1700's our founding father, John Wesley, understood well what it meant to go deeper with Jesus. In fact, a majority of his ministry was spent reaching people no one else was reaching. He reached out to those who were the poorest of the poor, the outcasts of society, those marginalized by the both the society and church of that day. Wesley believed that the church needed to be relevant to connect with the people of that day, and so he went to the people; he preached in the fields and on the streets – outside factories and inside local pubs and prisons. John Wesley so angered the leadership and average church member of that day that most churches closed their doors, and refused entrance to Wesley and those who thought the way he thought. But Wesley was more concerned about catching people and building up the Kingdom of God than he was in building up the Anglican church of England. And because he was willing to go into deep and dangerous waters 250 years ago, there was no stopping the movement of God's Spirit that became the Methodist movement.

As we look at our community and the world today, it's really not that different than Wesley's day. There are a lot of people the church is not reaching. To have a future with hope we, like Wesley, must be more focused on those we haven't been reaching than on those we are trying to keep. I know that's a hard statement to hear, but when we are worried, afraid that people might get mad or upset, then we are not likely to go deeper with Jesus.

If you are struggling with what this going deeper with Jesus means – you are not alone. Many of us long-time church members struggle with what it means. And because of that, I want you to know that on Sunday, March 31st at 2:30pm, in our fellowship hall, there will be a Healthy Church Initiative Workshop on "Reaching New People." I hope many of you will attend. It is simply not enough that a handful of church leaders attend this workshop, because it is all of us, together, who need to figure out what it means to go deeper with Jesus. We like to say the church is not a building but the people. Unfortunately, this is easier said than embraced. In truth, the church is a community of people that grows only as it builds relationships that bridge the gaps and breaks down the walls that separate people so that others can be reached for Christ.

Going into the deep means believing in the priesthood of all believers, and putting to use the wealth of gifts and abilities represented by each and every person sitting in this sanctuary today as well as those not here. We need to utilize all the gifts of creativity, hospitality, teaching, technology, building, repairing, passion, encouragement and knowledge that are represented by all of us. What do you think might happen if each and every follower of Christ believed it is our personal responsibility to go fishing?

When Jesus called us to follow, he didn't call us to be richer, smarter, more popular, or even more comfortable. Jesus called us to be fishers of people. Not the kind that sit by the side of the lake washing nets in frustration or the kind who return home convinced there is nothing we can do, but the kind of fishermen and women who get into their boats and go no matter how they feel and no matter how many trips they have already made.

Going deep with Jesus involves a willingness to see ourselves and others differently. And just because we have ignored or told inaccurate stories in the past about the deep – inaccurate stories about such things as racism and poverty, opportunity and oppression, justice and mass incarceration, hunger and plenty, right and wrong doesn't mean we are stuck in that way of thinking. We are not stuck in shallow water with no hope of things being different. However, we need to invite God to change that within us that has led us to judgment, bias, or feelings of futility. We need to invite God to send us back out where we have been tempted to give up. We need to invite God to raise up partners among those we have failed to see. We need to invite God to bring an abundance of love and grace into our low expectations and distorted perspectives.

All of this involves trusting God to lead us in ways that are beyond our expectation and understanding. It involves casting nets in places that are neither easy or convenient, predictable or comfortable. But if we are willing to trust God and to go deeper together, there's no telling the tremendous catch God will provide. So, if you believe God is still creating, Jesus is still calling, and the Holy Spirit is still empowering disciples today, then go deep and fish! Amen.