

"Don't Fear the Deep Waters"

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Luke 5:1-11

I love to imagine what these professional fishermen are thinking as Jesus, the son of a carpenter, gives them advice on how to catch fish. I mean—this has to be the first century equivalent of showing off your google-knowledge in front of your doctor or making “suggestions” to construction workers based on a YouTube video you saw.

Simon (who we usually know by his nickname *Peter*, which means “the Rock,”) has met Jesus once before, when Jesus came into his house to heal his mother-in-law from a high fever. So he knows Jesus to be a healer and a teacher, and I assume this is why he lets Jesus climb into his boat to begin with. Remember—Simon, James, and John aren't there by the shore because they want to hear Jesus—they're just washing their nets on the shoreline after a disappointing night of fishing in which they have caught nothing. Out of the hundreds of people there on the shore—they're the only three, in fact, who aren't there because of Jesus. Jesus is teaching on the shore when the crowds began to press in on him so much and backing him up closer and closer to the water that he has to climb into Simon's fishing boat just to give himself some space.

After he finishes teaching, Jesus tells the three fishermen to move their boats out into the deep water and drop their nets. <sigh> *We've been fishing all night and caught nothing...and besides, we just finished washing our nets and cleaning all the junk that collected on them after our night of bad fishing....but if you say so, I guess we'll drop our nets and try again.*

Almost instantly, their nets become so full that they're bursting! They call to their partners for help pulling them in, and both boats are so overloaded with fish that they are starting to sink. It's the largest catch any of these fishermen have ever seen! The single most successful day in their fishing career. And Simon says—*"Boys, we're going to be rich! This guy is a fish whisperer, and he can help us find so many fish that we can run everyone else out of business and build an enormous fleet of fishing boats so we can become*

rich and powerful and take over the world! Oh wait, that's not what he says. Instead, after the single-most-successful fishing haul of his life, Simon Peter quits and follows Jesus, and his friends go with him. Simon, James, and John don't even stick around to sell the fish.

Jesus isn't really teaching them any fishing secrets here—he's showing these three first disciples that they can trust him. And if they follow him, they will get to witness amazing things and even take part in them. Jesus gives them a glimpse of what is possible in the Kingdom of God. He replaces their frustration with hope. But I'm fascinated by what he says to them, “Put out into the deep water.” What if they had only been fishing close to the shore? What if they had been in all their familiar spots, where they had always made modest catches before? Close to the shoreline, safe and familiar. And what if they had been afraid to venture out into the middle of the lake, into the deep water. Into the unknown waters. The deep waters can be scary—they are murky, murky, dangerous, cold, inhospitable, hiding dangers, hiding shipwrecks. You can get caught in a storm or stranded far from the familiar shore.

I'm reminded of the Disney movie *Moana*, which is one of my favorites. On the Polynesian island of Motunui, the people have been afraid of fishing beyond the reef for generations, out of their fear of the dangerous ocean. As their island begins to die and the fishing runs out, they are in real trouble. But *Moana*, the daughter of the chief, discovers a cave full of antique sailboats, and she realizes that her people used to sail all over, exploring and fishing wherever they wanted to go. She steals an old boat and sneaks away to team up with Maui, played by Dwayne Johnson, the second person we've encountered today nicknamed “The Rock.” Together, they save the island. And then *Moana* leads her people back into the ocean—no longer afraid of the deep water.

Deep waters are definitely scarier than shallow waters—but the reward can be so much greater. But despite this fishing miracle Jesus performs, there are no guarantees in the deep water. You have to stay hopeful, stay vigilant, keep exploring the waters, and keep trying. And you might end up far, far from home.

For the last several decades, the mainline Protestant Church in the United States has found

itself surrounded by deep water. The waters around us seem downright dangerous—we see many churches taking on water and sinking; we see shipwrecks—or closed churches—all around us. And so we stick close to shore, in the shallow and familiar waters, afraid to venture out beyond the reef. When churches become afraid, they close ranks, turn inward, keep to themselves, and try to protect what they have left. They become suspicious of outsiders and begin to value their past more than their future. And they catch a few fish, here and there, in the shallow water. But they forget that they were sent by Jesus into the deep waters—into the unknown. They forget that they used to be brave ocean explorers, willing to take risks and try new things. They forget that Jesus called them not to preserve their traditions and buildings and institutions, but to join him in the transformation of the world.

Now I have to admit that I've never been entirely comfortable with the fishing metaphor for evangelism—I don't like to think of us trapping or ensnaring people in our nets. So I think of fishing more broadly as a metaphor for carrying our ministry as disciples. Inviting new disciples, certainly. But not trapping them. And more than just inviting disciples, we're offering healing and

hope, we're walking beside people in difficult circumstances and offering them community and friendship. We're feeding and clothing and working for liberation and justice and freedom for those who are oppressed or trapped. And we are sharing God's love and telling others about Jesus. The example we set of living out the gospel and living out God's love—this is what attracts people here to want to be part of our particular fishing crew. And our active welcome—not just a passive welcome of leaving the door unlocked, but actually inviting people warmly and personally. And being willing to be changed by them—that is true hospitality. That's what it looks like to love your neighbor.

"Put out in the deep water," Jesus says. Go out into your community, go out into the cities, go out into the world. Open your buildings for new ministries and new mission and new partnerships. Invite people inside who make you uncomfortable. Try new things—fish in new places, on new lakes, in deep water. Open your eyes to amazement, open your eyes to the amazing things that are possible in the Kingdom of God. It will be hard, but we can do hard things. It will be scary, but Jesus is with us in the boat. We can trust him. Amen.