

Fifth Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/C): "Putting Out Into the Deep"
Isaiah 6:1-8, Luke 5:1-11
February 5-6, 2022
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

A few weeks ago spigots on the wedding wine casks were wide open and wine was flooding the reception in Cana of Galilee. Today we have fish up to the gunwales, flopping around and sloshing over the sides, threatening to sink a couple fishing boats. Later we'll have a picnic lunch of fish and bread for well over 5,000 people, with so much food there are leftovers to take home. The common denominator of all this bounty? Jesus. Wherever He is there's bound to be "Abundanza!" Plenty for all! He seems to swing into action when anxiety is high, when we're afraid we're coming up **empty**, that there's too **little** to go around, that we're **scraping** the bottom of the barrel.

Our laundry detergent at home comes in a large container that you lay on its side. Then you push down a fat red button to dispense the soap into a cup. If you have one, you know what happens when it's almost empty: drip – drip – drip. You can get enough detergent for another load of wash if you're very patient and don't mind waiting for the last quarter cup of liquid to flow, slow as molasses in January. I think that's what the wine jugs in Cana were like (drip – drip – drip) BEFORE the mother of Jesus intervened and her Son turned water into wine.

Simon and his friends weren't hosting a party like the parents of the bride and groom in Cana. They were out making a living the only way they knew how: catch fish and sell them. For some people **then**, like for some people **now**, it was a hand-to-mouth existence. What you earn today you spend tomorrow to put food on the table. No income today, no food tomorrow. We don't know if things were **quite** that tight for Simon and his brother, and for James and John, their friends, but we can imagine the frustration of **nothing to show** after putting in a full day's work

(in this case, a full **night's** work – fishermen worked the graveyard shift so the fish wouldn't see them coming).

As the scene opens up, the disappointed fisherfolk are washing their nets before they go home to catch a few Z's, since they haven't caught anything else. For sure it's no coincidence that Jesus is preaching in the neighborhood. He's attracted quite a crowd, so large that the folks in back really can't hear him. He knows that sound carries better over water than land, so He decides to use a boat as His floating pulpit. He "just so happens" to pick Simon to row Him out in his boat.

We know **they** know each other, because earlier in Luke's story we heard how Simon must have been in the synagogue one Sabbath when Jesus cast out an unclean spirit (Luke 4:31-36). We deduce this, because after that worship service Jesus goes to Simon's house for lunch. Simon's mother-in-law has a terrible fever, and Jesus "rebukes" the fever, just like He "rebuked" the demon. We don't know how much time has passed since that healing, but we see that several pieces are falling into place here.... Jesus' and Simon's paths are crossing again, and from this point forward they'll be walking together, until one night in the high priest's courtyard when Simon denies knowing the rabbi from Galilee who's just been arrested. (Another story for another time.)

Simon, the professional fisherman, is pretty patient when Jesus, a landlubber carpenter (or craftsman of some kind), tells him to row out to deeper water and let the nets down -- again.

"Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets" (Luke 5:5). Maybe Simon politely agrees in deference to the Rabbi who healed his mother-in-law. Maybe he's too tired to protest and goes through the motions to hasten the time he can actually go home and crash. Or maybe, just maybe, Simon has an ounce of curiosity to see what will happen, a glimmer of hope that Jesus has more surprises in store.

Jesus often works miracles when we're at the end of our tether. Water only turns into award-winning wine when the last trickle of Thunderbird has run dry. The shoal of fish miraculously appears only after a long night of not-a-nibble. In St. Matthew's telling of the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord Jesus says, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven....*" (Matt. 5:3) Another way to say that is, "Blessed are those who know their need of God." What shows us our need of God more than suffering? When we're ill or injured in body or soul, when we're facing challenges that frighten us, when we really expected to succeed and instead we failed, when we were riding high and now we're face first on the ground: aren't these the times we reach out for God most intensely, intentionally, desperately? Aren't these the moments when we finally see through our supposed self-sufficiency, recognize our pseudo-independence, and truly know our need of God, feel our dependence upon the divine?

In such moments of scary-yet-beautiful vulnerability and openness-born-of-desperation, the Lord may invite us, too, "*Put out into the deep water and let down your nets....*" (Luke 5:4b) Because one door has closed, we may finally notice other, more life-giving doors, that have opened. Because what we considered foundational in our lives has crumbled, we may be ready to ground ourselves in something/Someone more lasting and trustworthy. Because we have suffered an ending, we may be spiritually primed for a new beginning.

Simon is certainly primed for a new beginning by the fever and fish wonders our Lord has worked in his life. When he sinks to his knees in shame, up to his waist in fish in the bottom of his boat, he pleads:

"Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8c, NRSV)
"Master, leave. I'm a sinner and can't handle this holiness. Leave me to myself."
(The Message)

Jesus doesn't argue that Simon is sinless, not sinful. This is why He came: to save sinners. He names Simon's obvious fright by saying: "*Don't be afraid.*" And as He prevented the shame of the

wedding feast hosts by turning water into wine, here he lifts Simon's shame and calls him to serve. Jesus doesn't say, "Follow Me," like we expect. He simply predicts, "...*from now on you will be catching people.*" (Luke 5:10b) "I helped you with your work; now you help Me with mine!"

Simon is so swept up by Jesus' works and words, he leaves that hull full of fish for someone else to sort and sell. 'Same with James and John, and we assume Andrew, Simon's brother, though he's not named. *When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.* (Luke 5:11) **They** were the true catch of the day.

We have to be "caught" ourselves before the Lord can use us to "catch" others. Maybe we're in one of those 'tween times in our own lives, an uncomfortable, even painful time of loss, confusion, transition. Maybe we're only too aware of the endings we've experienced, but can't yet see the glimmer of new beginnings. Maybe we haven't yet heard the Lord inviting us to put out into the deep and lower our nets, fully expectant of miracles. Regardless, we are allowed and even invited to ask the Lord to tell us what direction to steer our boat, where and when to lower our nets. My devotional Bible has this quote from Simone Weil's spiritual classic *Waiting for God*:

"The soul has to go on loving in the emptiness, or at least wanting to go on to love, though it may only be with an infinitesimal part of itself. Then, one day, God will come to show himself to this soul and reveal the beauty of the world to it."

The devotion continues:

It is often in periods of seeming fruitlessness that Jesus Christ reveals his power, and in times of darkness that God sheds the greatest light. Are you enduring a period of fruitlessness or darkness? Ask Jesus to tell you where to "let down your nets" in order to see his power revealed.¹

Amen.

¹*Spiritual Formation Bible* (NRSV). (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), p. 1357.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham