

CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

Into the Deep

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.' When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.' When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

***"[Jesus] said to Simon,
'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.'"***

Luke 5:4

The phrase "in deep water" is often thought of and used in negative terms. Most of us here today have undoubtedly found ourselves in deep water, in over our heads, overwhelmed by life and all that it can throw at you.

Perhaps you have just accepted a new and more challenging position at work; you have just moved – half of the house is still in boxes, the kids need to be signed up for school, you need to find a dentist and a doctor and a grocery store, most of the family is homesick, and on the third day of your new job, you made a huge faux pas in front of your co-workers. Driving home from work that night, you might consider the water very deep. We live and in our living find ourselves in deep water.

You might be for the first time alone in a room with a friend or a beloved family member who is dying, and you don't know what to say or what not to say, and you feel for a moment that you're in over your head. It's that feeling that you didn't study hard enough, prepare thoroughly enough, or in general simply don't know enough or can't seem to be enough.

More often than I care to admit I find myself saying frequently, when asked how I am doing, "I am keeping my head above water." It is just a polite way of saying, "I'm in too deep. I'm overwhelmed. I'm drowning."

And it is not just me. Deep waters. In over our heads. From what many of you tell me, you have been there too. Many of you *are* there! And it is not a good feeling. It is a threatening, life-diminishing feeling, but when it comes to the spiritual life, going deep is an essential step. It is a necessary risk, motivated by a sense of abundance and life in God, not scarcity.

When Ken Stabler, the great Oakland Raiders quarterback, was inducted into the Football Hall of Fame, he was asked if he had any advice. "Go deep!" he replied. He was not given to screen passes or short throws dumped across the middle. He loved to throw deep. A fitting illustration this is for our Gospel text today and for Super Bowl Sunday, and offered from one who doesn't know much at all about professional football!

Today's text is set along a seaside. "The people pressed upon him to hear the word of God," it begins. Jesus had already begun to draw crowds hungry for the word of God and for healing. When the crowd pressed upon him at the edge of the water so that he had no place to stand, he spied two boats and borrowed one for a pulpit. We have this picture of Jesus preaching in a boat a few yards offshore, the people crowded to the very edge of the sea.

The boat happened to belong to a fisherman named Simon. When the sermon was over, Jesus said to him, "Put out into the deep for a catch." Simon protested: "Master, we've fished all night and caught nothing." But Jesus says, "Put out into the deep."

The way of Jesus is not a superficial path. It does not skim the surface of things. His way cannot be captured in a sound bite or a bumper sticker. It is not content with the status quo or conventional wisdom. It goes deep.

We become comfortable with the tried and true, even when it is not working so well. But Peter Drucker, the self-describe "social ecologist," who died at 95 in 2005 warned: Sometimes to repeat the successes of the past is worse than a failure.

Jesus calls us from timid successes to the deep which risks failure but where the making of souls may happen.

I love the prayer of Sir Francis Drake, a naval hero:

*Disturb us, Lord, when
We are too pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true
Because we dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.*

*Disturb us, Lord, when
with the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst
For the waters of life...*

*Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wilder seas
Where storms will show Your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars...*

Disturb us, Lord!

When Jesus said, "Put out into the deep," Simon Peter at first balked, resisted, then consented. And when the fishermen threw their nets out, the nets were so filled with fish that they began to break; and when they began hauling the fish into the two boats, the boats themselves threatened to sink under the load.

Peter is suddenly terrified. He is in the presence of the numinous, the unexplainable and uncontrollable. And now he might drown. Has this miracle turned into a grave? He cries out, "Depart from me; I am a sinful man." He suspects that all that is happening is connected with his sinfulness. (We do that sometimes, interpreting misfortune as judgment on our sins.) But Jesus says to Simon: "Relax man. Chill out! Do not be afraid. This is not about you and your little

catalogue of sins. This is about the kingdom of God that is offered in abundance and overflowing!
This is about the kingdom of God that is for you and everyone!

Jesus calls us into the deep. The boat is not tucked safely in harbor. We are called to the high seas. Rowan Williams, who in my humble opinion is better at being a theologian than he is at being the Archbishop of Canterbury, the world leader of Episcopalians, wrote an essay a while back called "Theological Integrity." In it he used the words of Joseph O'Leary, who said that theology done with integrity is marked by "venture, slowness and strain."

But we know that our culture, including you and I, values what is safe, what is fast, what is easy. But the theological enterprise, just like the spiritual journey, when done with integrity, consists of "venture, slowness and strain." Think of a boat on the high seas, venturing, making its way slowly, enduring the strains of the deep. Venture, slowness, strain. We are called to a place where "deep calls unto deep." Not where superficialities meet trivialities. Where deep calls unto deep.

It is a journey inward and a journey outward. In the inward journey we offer to God the depth of who we are. The grace of God wants to go with us all the way back and all the way down so that there is no part of us untouched by the healing love and healing light of God. Sometimes when life throws us into the deep, we are tempted to rush to the surface, to retreat in fear; but the way to wholeness and healing is through the storm, not above it or around it.

In our beloved United Church of Christ, we often hear the words of the Pilgrim's pastor, spoken before they set sail on the Mayflower for the new world: "There is yet more light and truth to break forth from God's Holy Word." It is that phrase that has morphed into our current motto: "God is Still Speaking." But whether spoken to the Pilgrims long ago, or repeated among us today, it is a brave affirmation. And not just new light from holy scripture. The Celtic Christians spoke of God's revelation coming from two great books: the Book of Scripture and the Book of Creation. And as I shared on the first Sunday of Epiphany, we are now adding to these two a "third testament," the book of your life, of your own sacred self, of your own palpable experience of God. God speaks not only in scripture and in creation but also into and from the midst of your life. Let your life speak. From its depths, let your life speak.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, addressing the graduating class of the Harvard College Divinity School July 15, 1838 said:

*I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me
to say I would go to church no more . . .
He had lived in vain.
He had no one word intimating
that he had ever laughed or wept,
was married or in love,
had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined.*

*If he had ever lived and acted,
we were none the wiser for it.*

*The capital secret of his profession,
namely,
to convert life into truth,
he had not learned.*

Let your life speak. Let God speak, from the depths of your real life.

This journey is not just a journey inward but also a journey outward. Jesus turned to Simon and said, "From now on you will be catching people!" We are called into the deep because that is where people are drowning. Where lives are way too busy and overwhelmed and out of balance. Where lives are being lost and saved; where people are drowning in addiction and self-defeating behavior; drowning in poverty and illiteracy and injustice; drowning in sins which harm themselves

and harm others and harm God's creation; drowning in violence and bloodshed; drowning in despair and hopelessness.

"From now on," Jesus said, "You will be catching people." That's more than catching fish or catching the next episode of *Modern Family*. Catching people.

The text ends, "And they left everything and followed him." They left everything and followed him. What he offered was so important to them and for the world, they left everything and followed him.

One spiritual challenge here is the question: How will we who are among the most blessed of this earth and this nation and this city use our blessing for the healing of the world? How can we let our minds, hearts, talents, spiritual gifts and money become part of God's mission of catching people? The phrase "And they left everything and followed him" asks its own persistent questions to us who have and keep so much.

But thank goodness God doesn't call us to instant sainthood, doesn't expect us to wake up tomorrow and suddenly be a Martin Luther King, Jr. or a Sara Miles of food pantry fame. God invites you to a day-by-day, year-by-year path of transformation that is salvation to you and to the world.

One has said that "To follow Jesus is to give as much of yourself as you can to as much of Christ as you know." Every day I wake up with this very challenge: to give as much of myself as I can to as much of Christ as I know. It is going deep. Every day we can go deeper on both sides of that equation: the adventure of being able to give more and more of ourselves to Christ, and of knowing more and more of Christ to give ourselves to.

"[Jesus] said, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.'"

Can you hear him now?

Or, more importantly, will you follow him into the deep?