

In the Deep Water

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Have you noticed that water is everywhere? Surely, on this snowy weekend, we are thinking a lot about water, particularly in its frozen form, falling from the sky and making Seattle's hills very icy. Did you know the human body is around 60% water? 71% of the Earth's surface is covered by water. And water is important in the Biblical tradition as well. One scholar counted over 722 references to water in the Bible. In the Old Testament, the world is formed out of the primordial waters of chaos; water transforms the world in the Great Flood; the Hebrew people come through the Reed Sea. In the New Testament we read about baptisms in the Jordan river, about Jesus turning water to wine, about the "living water" of the gospel. And, as Baptists, we have a particularly close relationship to water.

Have you seen that joking meme about the differences between Methodists and Baptists, told by donuts? The Methodist donut is covered in sprinkles, while the Baptist donut hovers above a full cup of coffee, just having been "dunked." Get it? Full immersion is our tradition in Baptist life, signifying the spiritual renewal and rebirth as we emerge from under the water.

Water, whether filling the baptistry or flowing in the river in which we are immersed upon confession of believer's baptism, is intimately related to discipleship. Our Scripture today is one of many New Testament texts that makes this connection clear:

From the gospel of Luke, chapter 5:1-11, read in the Common English version:

5 One day Jesus was standing beside Lake Gennesaret when the crowd pressed in around him to hear God's word. 2 Jesus saw two boats sitting by the lake. The fishermen had gone ashore and were washing their nets. 3 Jesus boarded one of the boats, the one that belonged to Simon, then asked him to row out a little distance from the shore. Jesus sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. 4 When he finished speaking to the crowds, he said to Simon, "Row out farther, into the deep water, and drop your nets for a catch." 5 Simon replied, "Master, we've worked hard all night and caught nothing. But because you say so, I'll drop the nets." 6 So they dropped the nets and their catch was so huge that their nets were splitting. 7 They signaled for their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They filled both boats so full that they were about to sink. 8 When Simon Peter saw the catch, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Leave me, Lord, for

"I'm a sinner!" 9 Peter and those with him were overcome with amazement because of the number of fish they caught. 10 James and John, Zebedee's sons, were Simon's partners and they were amazed too. Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid. From now on, you will be fishing for people." 11 As soon as they brought the boats to the shore, they left everything and followed Jesus.

Lots of sermons are preached on this passage and its corresponding versions of the story in Mark and John...and these sermons focus on fishing. Well, I've been fishing only once in my life and am not prepared to share analogies about sportsmanship. You should be glad for that!

Let's wade into this story together, alongside Simon Peter as he learns about discipleship in the deep water. Here's the scene: Jesus was preaching and teaching in his home region of Galilee. This was a location under Roman occupation, a place sometimes referred to as "backwater." But Jesus of Nazareth had gathered quite a following by his teachings and healings and exorcisms. People wondered who this guy could be: is this really the Messiah, the one we've waited for? Or is he simply an itinerant preacher doing magic tricks? How is he special? So many people were wondering this, so many people were following him that he was pushed to the edge of Lake Gennesaret, the Sea of Galilee. As the crowds pressed in, he had to leave land and get in a boat anchored close to shore so that he might continue to preach to them. And Jesus chose Simon Peter's boat.

Jesus took a risk in asking Simon for a favor. "Won't you take me on the water, just a short ways, so everyone can still hear me but I have a little space?" Jesus initiated the relationship, initiates the risk. Simon could have said "no." But, tired from working all night long, Simon agreed. Maybe he, too, was interested in who this guy could be. Howard K. Gregory writes, "Into this context, where men and women come face to face with their limits and give up, Jesus enters and asks the men to push one of the boats away from the beach."

And then Jesus says this: "Row out into the deep water. Let down your nets for a catch."

Imagine yourself as Simon: He's minding his own business, going about his daily work. He's tired from the long night hauling in trammel line nets with his colleagues. And now this random itinerant preacher tells him how to do his job? And is telling him this from sitting inside Simon's boat? Tells him how he should go about fishing in deep water, when Simon knows full well he's been fishing all night with no results?! I imagine Simon wondering, "why me?"

Why did he have to get in MY boat?" as he thinks of how much longer it's going to take him to get home to his family. And that's a good question, why Simon? The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary reminds us that fishermen are not called because of "qualifications, character or potential. God's call is as unpredictable as it is unmerited." Notice that Simon is at work, completing his daily routine, when Jesus comes onto the scene next to the Galilean lake. This call to relationship, to involvement with God's work, did not come in a holy place, but in the middle of routine daily activities. Jesus' relationship with Simon is based on asking a favor, taking a small risk that becomes a great one.

Simon grants Jesus' request rather begrudgingly: "Because you say so, I'll drop the nets." And so goes following the way of Jesus. Sometimes we do ridiculous things. Perhaps we row out into the deep water, where we can no longer see the bottom, no longer catch sight of our goal, where our purpose feels obscure. Sometimes we are not really sure what will happen. Sometimes we think internally, "what are we doing? There's no point. This makes no sense." When talking to my friend Dan Lyvers, a Disciples of Christ minister in Colorado, about this passage, he said, "Everything we do as Christians is ridiculous, but we do it anyway." "Because you say so, I'll drop the nets." Somewhere along the way, faith takes over. But faith in what? Simon finds out as he goes into the deep water.

After a night of fishing and empty nets, exhaustion from hard labor, God's abundance presents itself. Risking a response to Jesus request proved more fruitful than Simon could ever imagine. One author observes, "So often the cost of discipleship does not come off the top; it is demanded of us after we have given everything that we can give. Jesus did not show up after a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast. He came to find these men at the end of a long working day, after backbreaking labor, and he told them to keep on working."

In these times, when climate change threatens the most vulnerable among us, when extreme weather events leave folks who are unhoused in more danger than ever, when wars are being fought and children imprisoned and political schemes seem more satirical than dangerously real, we may feel like we are in deep water. We can't see through the murky water surrounding us. The boat that had kept us safe, that we've spent years working with, is creaking and our nets, the provisions of our livelihood, are stretching and fraying...and the reality dawns on us: are we sinking? Why do we find ourselves here in the deep? What do I have to offer? I am tired. I am strained. I am stressed.

And then: abundance. More fish than we had imagined, giving us the strength to go forward, affirming that we are going in the right direction. Just when we lose sight, may we, as Simon Peter, encounter God's abundance in ways far beyond our expectations.

But I also wonder if Simon Peter saw the abundance of fish and thought, "Oh great, how am I gonna deal with this? Can anyone come here and fish and glean this size of harvest? Does my skill not matter, my lifetime of work in the fishing industry not matter, because this random guy can join me and we suddenly catch a bumper crop?" Does Simon worry he might fade into obsolescence? Does he worry all of the risk and energy of rowing into the deep water will be in vain because they are going to sink? Does Simon worry that his comrades who come to their aid in the second boat will also meet their peril because of the risk Simon took in following Jesus? It is easy for cynicism and frustration and angst to take over...and their root emotion: fear. Again, Howard K. Gregory: "The invitation to put out into the deep for a catch provides a sharp contrast to our human penchant for the predictable and the routine. It is an invitation to venture into new ground or new depths, but it also points to new challenges in mission and ministry for the church in every generation. We are challenged to respond to the urgings of God breaking into human lives. In the case of Simon, as for the Christian faced with such a command, there is realization that the most profound and significant experiences of God and life are not to be found in the safe ways and places."

So, friends, what is our deep water? What are the risks that feel just too risky? As an individual? As a church? When does it feel like God is asking too much of us?

Simon's interactions with Jesus in this passage show us that discipleship not only can feel somewhat pointless, somewhat silly, but can also feel dangerous. We may even feel threatened when following the way of Jesus: threatened by the abundance that is so much more than we imagined that we fear we will sink. Threatened by the loss of our power and privilege, of our comfort, shaken out of complacency.

The songs of our faith offer comfort in these times.

"When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;
for I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,
and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress."

Or perhaps like this: “I went down to the river to pray, studying about that good ole way...oh sisters, let’s go down, let’s go down, come on down...down to the river to pray.”

Or like this: “deep river, my home is over Jordan, deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into campground.” During the month of February, as we observe Black History Month, we remember the struggles faced by our black and African American siblings. Part of this is remembering that spirituals such as “Deep River,” contained codes for enslaved peoples to travel north to free states, encouraging them to “cross over” the Jordan River, a code for the Ohio river. This deeply religious song has provided encouragement for folks working for liberation for over two hundred years. This song, among many others that I have not named here, reminds us that Jesus is with us as we go into the deep water. Jesus encourages everyone to persist in our quest for freedom, for liberation, for justice, each in our own way. Eduard Schweizer says “faith does not come as assent to statements previously preached, but as trust in Jesus’ call to try once more, contrary to all dictates of reason.”

And in this deep water, we, like Simon Peter, come to realizations about our identity. Simon Peter falls on his knees before Jesus as he is struck by the extreme abundance of the catch. He admits his sinful nature, crying “Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinner!” But Jesus does not leave. Instead he says, “do not be afraid,” which may be translated as “do not recoil,” or “do not run away from me.” In the moments when we are so far in the deep that we feel we have risked it all and fear being overcome by the abundance and feel the only answer is isolation, Jesus won’t leave us, and tells us not to run away. While we are worried about catching fish, about pursuing our livelihood, about going home after a long work day, Jesus calls to us from the deep water to join him in witnessing the great abundance of God’s love, calls us to leave our fear and follow him. This call has consequences, and requires a reversal of priorities and a reordering of commitments. (NIB) Chandra Taylor Smith wrote that Simon Peter and his fellow fishermen “became active agents of justice for God; for it is impossible to live our passively the transformative vision of God’s just social order. Everyone is an active advocate for social justice in a truly just society.”

The crowds pushed in on Jesus until he removed himself from land and preached on water. The fishermen listened to Jesus as he told them to let down their nets, to try one more time. At every turn, Jesus’ persistence and risking relationship empowers others and calls them into doing the same for

the kin-dom of God. In the doing of kin-dom work, they realize more about themselves than they ever imagined.

David L. Ostendorf tells this passage from Scripture in this way: "God's word lived among them...the word has come to dwell in the midst of every day lives and everyday fishermen...God's living word cuts through the din of pressing crowds and the lives and labors of common people. It shapes the sweep of the human story. It alters the lives of those who hear and heed. God's living word cuts through daily life with the gift of freedom--the radical, radicalizing freedom that enables one to leave everything, to follow to the fullest. God's living word draws people in. it calls and pulls and then pushes people out--Simon and James and John, who could scarcely believe their net-bulging catch from deep, empty waters. They were amazed and yet afraid. The word came to them, captured them. They left boats and nets. They left the old way and followed. Heard and seen and heeded, God's living word demands our decision--it lays upon us the choice of staying on the boat or leaving everything and following, of moving through that transformative moment to the fullness of life, when ears and eyes and hearts are truly opened and we cannot turn back. For followers of the living word, life is never and can never be the same. It is altered forever."

This weekend last year, I visited Seattle First Baptist Church for the first time. It was my "incognito" visit, my first interview with the search committee in person and the weekend when I came to Seattle looking with the eyes of someone wondering, "Can I live here?" The sun shone that weekend. I felt pulled this way, pulled to the northwest, pulled to this congregation, as the search committee and I shared deeply from our hearts and asked "wonder" questions and discerned the way forward. But it wasn't until I joined the church service that morning when I realized how far I had rowed out into deep water. It wasn't until Tim's sermon that I realized exactly what was going on, that God was calling me to this congregation. It wasn't until Tim shared a quote from Marianne Robinson that I realized something about my own character, and began to acknowledge what I've really gotten myself into by visiting that weekend. The quote from A Course in Miracles, goes like this:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of

God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

And so, as we go about these times that feel like deep water in so many ways, may we remember that God is always with us, leading us in myriad ways that are more than we imagined. When it feels like our feet can no longer touch the bottom and the waves rise around us and we don't want to row out any farther, the Holy One is with us, calling to us, “Do not be afraid! I am with you always!” Friends, we are invited to join in the work of the kin-dom of God, the work of the beloved community, as we go deeper in faith and continue to learn more about ourselves. Let us liberate ourselves and each other from our fears, and live into our truest identities as beloved children of God. Leave everything else behind, all other identities, all other loyalties, and follow.