

Epiphany 5C 2019 Sermon

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 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.

1 Corinthians 15:9-10a *For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.*

Isaiah 6:1-8, [9-13]

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

*"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory."*

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

Jesus, standing on the shore of the lake of Gennesaret (Luke's name for the Sea of Galilee), is teaching a crowd of people, and they are "pressing in on him." So he gets into one of two boats that happen to be there, and asks the fisherman who owns the boat – Simon Peter (who from now on I will just call "Peter") – to put out a little way from the shore, which Peter does; and Jesus teaches the crowd from the shallow waters. When he finishes teaching the crowd, he says to Peter, "Put out into the **deep** water and let down your nets for a catch." Peter answers, "Master, we have worked all night but have caught nothing." But he nonetheless does what Jesus says to do. He rows out into deep water and lets down his nets, and there are so many fish filling the nets that the nets begin to break, and Peter has to call for his partners, James and John, to come in *their* boat and help. The abundance of fish fill both boats to the brim, such that they begin to sink. And when Peter sees it, he falls down at Jesus' knees and says, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

What is going on here? I think we can discover an important key to the meaning of this Gospel story if we pay attention to the *movement* from shore to shallow water to deep water; for I believe that Luke is symbolically telling us that there is a corresponding movement in Jesus' teaching: from surface to shallow to deep.

If we think of Jesus' teaching from the solid ground of the shore as kind of an "Introduction to the Gospel" or "Gospel 101," then we might think of his teaching from the shallow waters as going a little deeper – say, "Gospel 201." But Jesus is about to call the first of his 12 disciples; and the teaching, training, and apprenticeship required to prepare Peter and the other disciples for the mission on which Jesus will send them is of another type entirely. Gospel 101 and 201 were showing the crowds the tip of the iceberg, if you will: that part of the Gospel that can be seen with the eyes of the flesh and grasped with the intellect. But if they are to truly become "fishers of people," Peter and the other disciples must come to know the 90% of the iceberg which is *below* the surface of the water, in the realm of the spirit, the kingdom of God. And this will require more than verbal **education**; it will require spiritual formation.

The only verbal instruction Jesus gives to Peter is: "Put out into the **deep** water and let down your nets for a catch." Jesus *says* no other words. He will allow the impending **experience** to do the teaching. And notice that Jesus doesn't tell Peter **what** he will catch. Peter *assumes* that when Jesus says, "let down your nets for a catch," he is speaking of catching ordinary fish. But the miracle that Peter, James, and John are going to witness is not about catching a lot of fish; it is, rather, a revelation, a sign of the overwhelming abundance of life to be found as one goes deep into the realm of Spirit, the kingdom of God.

Peter is blown away by the incredible haul of fish. He knows that he has just witnessed a miracle of such a magnitude as could only be accomplished by God. He suddenly realizes that he is in the presence of the divine, the holy. And when one encounters the holy, one becomes immediately aware of one's own

unholiness. No longer calling Jesus “Master,” Peter says, “Go away from me, **Lord**, for I am a sinful man!”

This is exactly what happens to Isaiah in our Old Testament today, and it is what Paul speaks about in our Epistle: in the presence of the holy, Isaiah and Paul become conscious of their comparative **unholiness**. Having been given a vision of the heavenly court in all its glory, Isaiah says, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips...” And Paul, the former persecutor of Christians whose life was turned completely around when he was blinded by a light from heaven, Paul writes to the Corinthians, “I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”

Put in another way, Isaiah, Paul, and Peter, exposed to the pure light of God, immediately see what depth psychologists and spiritual teachers (like Carl Jung and Richard Rohr) would call their “shadow self” – that part of ourself which we are not proud of, which we would rather not think about, which we would like to stay beneath the level of consciousness. (Think of Jeff Bezos having to publicly confront his own shadow in recent weeks...) And it is in large part because we **don’t** want to look at our shadow side that we tend to avoid the deeper reality of the realm of the Spirit (where we see both ourselves and God clearly). Instead, we live our lives on the surface, live almost entirely on the level of our ego selves, our surface selves, what Thomas Merton called our “false selves.”

My friends, life lived on the surface is characterized by egos squaring off against egos. Life lived on the surface is a life of comparison, for the ego always wants to consider itself better than, smarter than, harder working than, a better Christian than others. Life lived on the surface is characterized by me and my group always having to win, which means that others and *their* group must always lose. Life lived on the surface is characterized by judging everything we see as good or bad, right or wrong, white or black, citizen or immigrant, Republican or Democrat, Christian or Muslim – and on and on.

When one lives one’s life on the surface, it is almost impossible to understand Jesus teachings, and to take them seriously. Love my enemy? No way! Do good to those who hurt me? In your dreams! Turn the other cheek? How stupid do you think I am? Forgive 70 x 7? I’ll forgive when the other person apologizes! Do not judge? You can’t live in this world without making judgments!

And here’s the thing: It is possible – indeed, it is common – to live on the surface of **good** things. Richard Rohr writes: “To stay on the surface of very good things, like Bible, sacrament, priesthood, or church, is to often do very unkind and evil things, while calling them good.”¹ I have been listening to a lecture series about the period of time between 1450 and 1650 A.D., and, my friends, I cannot **begin** to tell you about the wars and torture and atrocities that Christians committed against Christians, all in the name of Scripture and its “correct interpretation.” Well into the 19th Century, the Bible was being used to justify

slavery and racism; and even today, it is being used to demonize Muslims, Jews, refugees escaping war and poverty, those of a different sexual orientation, and on and on.

But there are also positive signs in our world today – signs that we are beginning to face our own shadows. Just this past week, Pope Francis stated publicly that nuns have been abused by priests – the first time a pope has ever publicly admitted this. And that shadow side of priests who have abused children has been brought, more and more, into the light of day. In the state of Virginia, it was revealed just this past week that elected officials took part in racist activities while in college or medical school. That shadow side of male culture which has abused and harassed women (and, in some instances, young men and boys) for centuries is finally being brought into the light of day, as inappropriate behavior by prominent people in the media, politics, and Hollywood has been uncovered and made public.

Now, it would be easy for you and me to sit back and point our fingers at these prominent people who have done bad things and label them our moral inferiors. But to do so would be to deny that we, too, have our *own* shadow sides that we are not proud of and would like to keep under the surface of our consciousness, so that we can continue to put forth a glittering image of ourself to others and to our own ego. Yet we will never completely get rid of our shadow: we will never arrive at that point where we no longer have to say in worship, “Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.”

And that’s OK! For the good news of today’s Scripture readings, my friends, is that although Isaiah was a man of unclean lips, and Paul was unfit to be called an apostle, and Peter was a sinful man, God nevertheless used each of these flawed people to transform lives and manifest, albeit incompletely, the kingdom of God on earth. Because these flawed people had the courage to face their own shadows and leave the shallow waters of their false selves – because Isaiah, Paul, and Peter had the courage to stop living on the surface of life and enter the deep world of the Spirit, the light of God’s love and mercy shone through their lives out into the dim surface-world, and the kingdom of God slowly spread. Each of these flawed people were sent out, in their own way, to fish for people; and each of them, in their own way, invited others to push out into the deep, let down their nets, and experience the miraculous abundance of divine love and grace.

AMEN

1 <https://danutm.wordpress.com/2013/05/26/richard-ronr-trinity-sunday-surface-versus-depth/>