

When we left Luke's Gospel last Sunday, Jesus managed to slip away from an angry crowd of people who wanted to through him off the town cliff on account of his preaching. Now we find Jesus again in the midst of a crowd, but now the large crowd presses around him in a good way: eager to hear his instruction. They have gathered on the shore of the sea of Galilee, and so many folks are there that Jesus needs to get into a local fisherman's boat and use it as a teaching platform.

I wonder what that fisherman, Simon, was thinking when this itinerant preacher came over and asked to use his boat. Was he curious about what Jesus had to say? Was he hoping that maybe this guy, with such a big following might be able to give him a little payment for using the boat? After all, it had been a bad night fishing. Was he concerned that the crush of the crowd might get dangerous? Was he eager to hear more from this carpenter-turned-preacher? Curious, hopeful, concerned, eager? Perhaps a mixture of all of the above? But the bottom line from Luke is that Simon brought Jesus into his boat and they set out a bit into the lake, where Jesus sat down to teach the crowd.

Interestingly, and perhaps disappointingly, this Gospel provides no specific details (or even a summary) of what Jesus taught that morning. We only know that the large crowd pressed in to hear the word of God from him. No problem that they were not in the synagogue; no problem that there was no scroll of Scripture available for Jesus to read from. They were open to encountering the holy, even in the unexpected venue of a fishing boat.

Simon too was surprisingly open to the unexpected, it seems. When Jesus finishes teaching, he turns to Simon and tells him to put out into the deep for a catch. This carpenter-by-trade, now a roving preacher, is telling the experienced fisherman how to fish! Some might call that meddling. It definitely goes beyond the usual skill set of either a carpenter or a preacher.

And yet Simon gives only a brief synopsis of last night's woeful fishing results before acquiescing to Jesus' instructions. He does not dig in his heels with a "we tried that already and it didn't work" refusal. He does not remind Jesus of his lack of fishing experience. He goes along because Jesus said so- and up comes a huge net of fish, so heavy and full that they need another boat and more helpers to pull it all in- and still the boats are so heavily laden with fish that they start to sink a bit.

Simon is the first one to recognize this overflowing and abundant catch as a sign of God's glory. An alternate translation from the Greek reads "For amazement surrounded him and all those who were with him at the catch of fish" * **AMAZEMENT SURROUNDED HIM!** And Simon responds, not with thankful praise or expressions of rejoicing, but with an awareness of his own imperfection. He says, "go away from me, because I am a sinner, Lord." It is the same response of contrition that we hear from Isaiah in the first lesson today when he has a vision of the throne of God: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips". It seems that the direct experience of God, in both the Scriptures and in the writings of the Judeo-Christian spiritual tradition, includes both radical amazement and a humble and acute awareness of one's own sinfulness, human limitation, and imperfection.

And God is not put off by that. Not at all. One 18th century Jewish teacher** put it this way, "Your holiness shall consist of being truly human, not angelic. God has plenty of angels." Simon's startled request for Jesus to go away because of Simon's sinfulness comes before Jesus has asked him anything. And it does not deter Jesus one bit. Jesus simply tells Simon "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be

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** The Kotzker Rebbe 1787-1859

catching people.” There is not even one little admonishment to repent. No “go and sin no more”, no instructions to sell everything he has in order to be perfect. Simon says he is a sinner and Jesus tells him not to fear, he will be a fisher of people. Boom. Mic drop.

And when they got to shore, they followed him.

When I arrived here a little over a year ago, some of you may have been feeling like your nets were empty. That is expected after a rector’s departure, as a period of transition begins.

And still we put out in to the deep together and dropped the net, as Jesus tells us to do.

We put out into the deep to look at the history and mission of the SPR community, to tell the story of this parish and its rich ministries.

We put out into the deep to examine ourselves, our strengths, our imperfections and our hopes and dreams for the future.

We put out into the deep with the search committee and the vestry.

We put out in to the deep to call the next rector, someone who shares our vision of fishing for people as Jesus instructed us.

And just as it happened to Simon, our nets have come up with filled with abundant gifts! Together, we have held the nets and dropped them in to deep water. We have continued to worship and to serve. We have grown in our ministries of service, continued our commitment to radical hospitality and to serving everyone in times of need and suffering, helping lift one another’s burdens, and to work passionately for the end to the injustice and oppressions that increase those burdens.

And we have celebrated the fullness of the catch in worship, with our children and youth, in music and rejoicing, and in the calling of new clergy leadership. We have seen that God continues to work in and through this community. And we have shown, in a very real sense, that we must push out in to the deep, in faith and courage, to find what God has for us. We do so, even though we aren’t perfect (yet), knowing that God moves in our true human-ness, even as She did in Simon and the Isaiah and so many people of God before us.

Now it is time for me to let go of this local SPR fishing net, while your hands continue to hold it, and Catherine’s hands will soon join yours. I go on to another parish to fish for people with them in their locale. But the boat of the people of God is large and it is not limited by geography. From the divine perspective, I believe that our following Jesus and fishing for people is all of a piece and connected. You may not see my hands on the net here, but we will be joined very truly in the heart of God. We will remain intricately linked in bringing in the overflowing kingdom of God’s mercy, justice and love for the people of this world.

Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord, alleluia, alleluia!

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