

“Unexpected Catch and Calling”  
 delivered Sunday, February 7, 2010  
 By Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor  
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 Luke 5:1-11

As we all know the earliest disciples of Jesus were fishermen, and the gospels tell us Jesus’ initial call to follow was accompanied by these words: “From now on you will be catching people.” Sheer familiarity with that expression, has led most of us – I imagine – to accept the analogy as a vocational shift for these fishermen who left one way of life represented by their nets, boat and Father Zebedee, for another way of life as followers and friends of Jesus. But if you stop and think about it, you have to wonder what exactly does it mean to fish for people? After all, when fish get caught, it is not a very good thing for the fish! Their silvery, shining, flip-flopping bodies soon have the life drained out of them and they become dull, gray and dead. Not such a pretty image for people to be likened to caught fish!

After listening to our guest speaker last weekend, church historian Diana Butler Bass, talk about the decline of the church as an institution in American religious culture, you could easily cast this image in a negative light and say – “Yep, the fishing image is part of the problem – because a lot of people think the church has become like caught fish – dull, gray and dead.”

But this gospel story before us this morning is more hopeful than that; Jesus’ call to the church in our time is more hopeful than that, and the hope of it hinges on something Jesus tells the fisherman to do: “Put out into deep water,” Jesus says, “and let down your nets there for a catch.” Now, to fish in deep water would have been counter-intuitive for these professional fisherman in the lake of Gennesaret. While the absolutely exhausted Simon Peter stands on the shore saying, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing,” you can imagine he’s thinking – what on earth does Jesus, the carpenter, know about fishing? Going out in deep water would make no sense to Simon Peter, or to James and John – skilled fisherman all. They knew the best fishing was near the shore, half way between the villages of Capernaum and Gennesaret, in the shallow coves where the warm mineral springs flow into the lake and make them fertile for fishermen. Jesus was an exciting teacher about God, but he was a small town builder, a carpenter, and here he comes along saying, move away from the shore where you no longer know the lay of the land, and drop your net in deep water.

What the gospel writer Luke wants us to know is that while the fishermen are still looking for fish, Jesus is already talking about catching people. Remember, there was a crowd pressing in on Jesus. So large a crowd, in fact, that Jesus has to get into a boat and go out a little from shore in order to teach them. When Jesus says to the fishermen, “put out into the deep water,” it is a continuation of his teaching, not so much about fishing, as about where one finds abundant life with God.

The deep is a highly symbolic word for the place where people most need a connection with the living God. The very first verses of scripture – in the book of Genesis – say that when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. (1) There, “the deep” means that mysterious, dark place yearning for God to bring order out of chaos. It’s the kind of “deep” we have seen in the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake when people are asking the most profound questions about who God is and why there is so much innocent suffering. That is the deep of chaos dying for order. In another passage of scripture, the Psalmist cries out to God saying, “In the abundance of your steadfast love, answer

me. Let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters.” (2) That is the deep likened to the yearning of prayer, the desperate need for God to come to one’s assistance, to rescue and to save. In another very familiar part of scripture, where we have a story that is central to our Christian life, we find that word again. In the gospel accounts of the resurrection, we are told the women arrive at the tomb of Jesus “at early dawn.” (3) The Greek word here for “early” is really a word better translated as “deep.” The women arrive at deep dawn – it’s that terrible time when your closest friend, mentor and Lord has died on Friday, and you are still in shock about it, and yet you have to do what people do to get ready for a funeral. Here, “deep dawn” is that time of unbearable grief before the light of resurrection begins to warm the human soul with hope and belief.

So back to our story for today, when Jesus told those fishermen, “Put out into the deep water,” he was saying that is where you will be catching people – where the questions of faith are profound, where doubts about who God is and who we are in relationship to God tug at the heart; where and shallow, surface, easy-answer religion may work for a while, but it’s not be where the large catch comes from in the long run.

Diana Butler Bass’s Monday morning presentation this past week was offered to members of Shandon, but also to those who could not have attended on Sunday – colleagues from all over our presbytery and our ecumenical partners from Lutheran, Episcopal, and Methodist churches. Speaking to these leaders of Columbia’s Protestant churches, Diana presented statistical information about the cultural challenges facing the church today.

It is true, in terms of membership the mainline church is in decline. Not only that – the more evangelical denominations are also in decline. From the outside, the non-denominational churches look big – but their membership is flat. She mentioned Willow Creek as an example – the first well known seeker congregation and mega church in the suburbs of Chicago. It is losing its seeker members rapidly – for everyone coming in the doors, another is leaving. Where are they going? To mainline Protestant churches all over Chicago because people want something deeper. Denominational membership everywhere is declining. Weekly participation in religious gatherings in North America is on a downward slope. Fewer people than ever before describe themselves as “religious” – meaning fewer and fewer people are attaching themselves to religious institutions.

However – listen to this – more people than ever before in American culture are describing themselves as “spiritual,” meaning the number of people who are searching for a relationship with the living God is on the rise. What the church needs to figure out, according to Diana Butler Bass, is how to address this spiritual yearning that is widely present in our culture, but goes beyond our traditional ways of doing institutional religion.

In her book, *A People’s History of Christianity*, she gives an example of what she is talking about. Back in the mid-1980’s she had the opportunity to hear Henri Nouwen, whose books on the spiritual life are widely read by Catholics and Protestants alike. He was lecturing at Harvard University about “living the life of Jesus” discussing everything from the earliest Christian monastic practices to more contemporary Latin American liberation theology. What was astonishing was the great diversity of students who came from all over the Boston area to learn from him – from every denomination and theological perspective – Roman Catholic priests and bearded Orthodox clergy, seminary students who were black, white, male, female, rich, poor, liberal and conservative. As Nouwen lectured about “life with Jesus,” that Harvard-educated, intellectual crowd of clergy and seminary students began to let their tightly-held, heady doctrines slip to the background, as new, more urgent concerns of faith and human compassion came to the

fore. One of the graduate students wrote of the experience, “The normal rules of academic engagement seemed to be suspended as long as Nouwen was nearby. Students began to speak openly, outsiders mingled freely, everyone shared their insights back and forth, occasionally we became tearful – a rare sight at Harvard. In this atmosphere somehow everyone’s thoughts and feelings mattered, regardless of their views or intellectual credentials.” (4) From the head alone into the heart and soul of one’s very being, the conversation moved to greater depths.

That is where I believe this text is calling a church like Shandon Presbyterian to go with Jesus, to let our nets down in deep water. To risk leaving the comfortable shallows of life, and to begin to explore the depths of faith and faithfulness. To figure out what we are willing to give up and give away in order to go after a life with Christ. To share with others what that life means from our inner selves, so that our deepest fears and most profound joys might bubble up. In some vibrant places, and in some significant ways, we are reaching those kinds of depths at Shandon, but as a congregation there is room for greater depth.

I spoke to a few of my fishing friends in the congregation this week and I asked each of them: What do fishermen know that other people do not know? They offered some good collected wisdom: You have to know how to be patient, and try different approaches, said Bob Williams. Our son James added, you have know what the fish eat and which lures best imitate their food. You have to establish a profile for the fish, said Jim Thames, to know the weather, the atmospheric conditions, what temperature of water certain fish like. Mike Williams who fishes a lot, but who is also an artist whose work reflects his love of fishing in sculpture and painting said, “You have to walk away from the road, go upstream away from the popular places where everybody else fishes, and find your own place to connect. He went on: I can associate anything metaphorically with fishing. It’s all there – attraction, predators, life, sustenance – a fish is a wonderful, sensuous, organic, symbol of life.

Like Shandon’s own fishermen, Jesus knew quite a lot about fishing – even for a carpenter. People who fish, you see, not only have skill; they also have understanding and intuition and feeling and a sense of artfulness about how to do it well, and that I believe is where Jesus is calling the church in this new era of being Christian together. To be willing to search for something we cannot yet see, with understanding and intuition and feeling and a sense of artfulness, to put out in deep water – for there alone will we find abundant life with God. AMEN.

#### NOTES

- 1) Genesis 1:2.
- 2) Psalm 69:14.
- 3) Luke 24:1.
- 4) Diana Butler Bass, *A People’s History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*, p. 276-278.