

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany      February 7, 2010  
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas      Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Isaiah 6:1-8  
 Psalm 138

1 Corinthians 15:1-11  
 Luke 5:1-11

## Out into the deep

*“Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” [Luke 5:4]*

Today’s Gospel is for all of us who feel as if we are skimming along the surface of life on a motorboat. It is for all of us who are busy, working hard, and hurrying along, but who sometimes feel enmeshed in things that are trivial, repetitive, boring, unsatisfying. Daily life can be a grind. Like the fishermen in this story who fished all night long and never caught a thing, we, too, go through times in our lives when day after day we throw our nets over the side of our boats and half the time, and maybe more than half, have nothing much to show for it. The nets are coming up empty, and we feel as if we are living on automatic pilot, stuck in our mindless routines. We drop off the kids; we pick them up again. We shop for groceries, cook the meal, and clean up -- again. We drive to work, put in a day’s labor, go home and catch up on sports, the soaps, the latest scandal or crime. We fill our minds with the worries and cares of the world; we fret about things; we circle around our anxieties like a moth around a flame, and then we escape our repetitive preoccupations by paddling in the world of entertainment, maybe amuse ourselves with celebrity gossip, the latest movie, or the newest gadget. We post a note on Facebook, try out a new recipe, order something online, or check off another item on our list of things to do. The sun rises; the sun sets; and what does it all add up to? Another day passes, and even though we may be outwardly successful and have gotten a thousand things done, something in us feels restless, impatient, and unfulfilled. Something inside keeps tugging at us, keeps murmuring its baleful question, “Is that all there is?”

I don’t know if I am conveying it well, but I am trying to express that sense of quiet despair that can come upon us when we feel as if we are trapped in the shallows of life, and our lives feel too small. We can go very dutifully through the motions -- we do what needs to be done at home, we show up at work, we even show up at church -- but somehow we feel trapped, as if real life, what Dostoevsky called *zhivaja zhizn’* -- “living life” -- has somehow eluded us and is out of reach.

Today’s Gospel is also for those of us who are getting older. A friend of mine who was trained in Jungian psychology used to speak about Jung’s idea that we have two distinct tasks in life. During the first part of our lives, most of us try

to expand on the horizontal level: we want to become more competent in navigating the ways of the world. We want to enlarge our database, meet new people, see more places, acquire more skills, expand our horizons. We are like a rubber band that stretches out horizontally, growing larger and larger. But in the second half of life, it's as if the rubber band tips on its end. We become hungry for the vertical dimension. We are no longer satisfied with the surface of things, but want to go deep. We ask new questions. What is the purpose of my life? What really matters? What really lasts? What is most deeply true, and how do I align my life with that truth?

So whether you are longing for the depths because you are getting older, or because -- whatever your age -- your skipping-stone self is tired of staying on the surface, today's Gospel is for you. "Put out into the deep water," Jesus says to Simon Peter, and to us, "and let down your nets for a catch" [Luke 5:4].

How do we put out into the deep? There are many ways. Maybe we go on a pilgrimage or make a retreat. Maybe we enter an intensive period of prayer, begin psychotherapy, show up at 12 Step meetings, or set aside regular time for solitude, silence, and contemplation. Maybe we find a spiritual director or make a commitment to attend adult ed classes on Wednesday nights. Sometimes it is life itself that pulls us into the depths -- an experience of illness or a brush with death, a failed relationship or a loss that overwhelms us with grief. Contemplative prayer is the practice that Christians have especially trusted over the years to draw us down below the surface of things, and simply closing one's eyes for a little while and consciously breathing in the love of God is a way to begin to attune oneself to the Christ who dwells within.

But however we make the plunge, however we cast not just our nets but also our whole selves into the deep, we have to relinquish our small selves, our social selves, our selves that locate our identity in what we do, what we have, what other people think about us, and what we ourselves think. When we drop "like a stone [into] the quiet depths of each moment,"<sup>1</sup> we are in over our heads, no longer in control. As one writer observes in a book about Thomas Merton, "To sink is to vanish."<sup>2</sup> The whole ego-project of proving ourselves and promoting ourselves, justifying ourselves and defending ourselves -- all that gets stripped away, washed away in the deep currents of God. In the depths we are simply naked before the divine Mystery, unguarded, undefended, holding on to nothing, drawn moment by moment to a deeper union with the Lover of our souls. In the end, prayer is not about trying to influence God or to change God's mind -- it is about letting

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<sup>1</sup> James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere: A Search for God through Awareness of the True Self*, Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1978, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

everything go so that we are completely free to belong to God. And in this experience of radical self-emptying, we discover that our deepest identity is to share in God's own life, to enter into a relationship of deep intimacy with the Divine.

We have nothing, but we have everything. We possess nothing, but we possess everything. We hold on to nothing, but everything is being given to us. We have been drawn into an abundant life that we did not create and that does not depend on us for existence, but which, by the grace of God, is always flowing through the core of our being and which can well up into our lives, pour out of our hands, and bear good fruit in the world around us. The Gospels speak again and again of God's surprising abundance -- water turns into wine [John 2:1-11], the loaves and fishes multiply [Luke 9:10-17], and Simon Peter suddenly has so many fish leaping into his nets that he must enlist the help of his friends, and even then both boats are sinking and the nets are breaking from the abundance of the catch. I like to imagine how the jaws of those weary fishermen dropped in amazement, and how they threw back their heads to laugh!

It is a joyful and "a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" [Hebrews 10:31]. Peter drops to his knees before Jesus, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" [Luke 5:8]. Peter is filled with humility and awe. His ego can take no credit for the fish; there is no room for pride. Peter *did* answer Jesus' call, and he *did* cast his nets into the deep. He *did* have a role to play in the miracle, by doing what was in his power do and by giving himself fully to the task. But he knows through and through that he himself is not responsible for the outcome, and that the outcome of his efforts is in the hands of God. As Paul writes in his Letter to the Ephesians, the glory belongs to God alone, whose "power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine" [Ephesians 3:20].

If I were to summarize what I hear in our Gospel today, it would be something like this:

1) Notice where you have settled for a small life, for a life that is shallow, or wasted on trivial things.

2) Plunge into the deep. Take up the practice of contemplative prayer, or selfless service, or whatever helps you to relinquish your small self and to discover again that the deep ground of your being is love [Ephesians 3:17]. When our consciousness is open to the divine Presence in which we are submerged, then we can return to our ordinary tasks with fresh energy and a new perspective.

And finally -- 3) Listen for your call. God has a mission for you! When you know that you are loved, when you know that your deep self, your real self, is in God and that you are made for union with God, then God will send you back out into the world to speak and act fearlessly for peace, for healing, for reconciling and

setting free. “Do not be afraid,” Jesus says to Simon, and to us, as well. The outcome of our efforts is in the hands of God, and we trust that God will work through us, and that, in a way we cannot possibly imagine, our lives will bear abundant fruit. God is whispering in our hearts, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”, and we dare to reply, “Here am I; send me!” [Isaiah 6:8].