

## “Looking for God in All the Wrong Places”

Luke 5:1-11, February 4, 2007

San Dimas Community Church, UCC

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Simon and company had already put in a long day's work when Jesus appeared on the scene. They were cleaning their nets so they could call it a day, go home, get some rest. It had not been a productive day. They'd fished all day and caught nothing.

We've had days like theirs, haven't we? Days when we don't get done what we needed to accomplish. When we keep getting interrupted, when we work all day long and yet, have very little to show for it.

When Jesus tells Simon and the others to stop packing up and instead return to their boats with the very nets they'd just about finished cleaning and sail way out to the deep, I doubt that this was what they wanted to hear. But Simon says, well, if you say so, Jesus; he had little hope for a catch of fish and he could have been just a little irritated or at least frustrated that his long day's efforts weren't recognized as enough for Jesus. As he and the others sailed out into the deep, maybe he thought this would be a “Jesus, I told you so” moment.

Well you know the rest of the story. They caught more fish than they could handle. Apparently, they'd been looking for fish in all the wrong places. Jesus guided them to the place where their efforts could actually mean something. For Simon, fishing was his life; but Jesus gave him another reason to live. Instead of catching fish, he was to capture the imagination of people in a new movement. He would find his life's meaning in a new vocation as one who gathers people into God's realm, as he had previously gathered in fish. But at this point the metaphor fails, because fish are gathered in to die; Simon would gather people in for the new life they would find through following Jesus.

This possibility scares Simon; he's not only overwhelmed with fish, he's overwhelmed with the thought of what his new calling might mean. When he falls before Jesus and says, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” just maybe he was not only admitting his shortsightedness and lack of faith, but perhaps this new, unknown calling was so frightening that he would rather pretend he was not worthy enough to be one of Jesus' followers. But Jesus has “caught” Simon and he doesn't let him off the hook so easily; Jesus tells him not to be afraid and compels him to follow him.

Sometimes as seekers after God, we look for God in all the wrong places. We think we already know where God is; we're afraid to get too far away from our comfort zone. We may be afraid to hear a God that is still speaking; and we may prefer a God who is done speaking so we can spend our time interpreting God's words so they say what we want them to say. Maybe we're worn out; we've worked for years, and our efforts have fallen short; now we've done our part; we want to rest. We will find God in the convenient places not the deep waters.

And then we hear Jesus say, “don't pack up and go home yet, sail out into the deep, throw out your nets one more time.” Though we'd rather not, like Simon, we follow Jesus words. Jesus asks a lot of us. To commit ourselves to Christ is a big deal and awesome calling. The disciples followed Jesus around a rather small area of land and listened to his teaching. Jesus never told them to worship him. Jesus never said, demand that people say the words: “I take Jesus as my personal Savior.” Jesus demanded more than lip service; he said sail out further, into the deep waters. He said, follow me, do what I do, gather in the people, and teach them a new way of being in the world.

Friday and Saturday Christina and I went to a church growth seminar. I learned some things and heard some good ideas. Yet, I also heard a lot about buildings and numbers. Jesus never said, "build big buildings". He never said, "your church must grow 20% each year." Jesus demanded more than material benchmarks of success. He called his followers to share a radical new way of being in the world, to help people get unstuck from their past, and to inspire them to genuine, transformation and a new future.

Over the years I've become clearer that all the stuff that goes with being church (the building, the musical instruments, the materials) these are only important if it feeds our mission; if it provides sacred space in which to do our work; if it provides inspiration to reach out to others in our world. Sometimes it's easier to focus on the stuff of church rather than the mission we are called to do. We can put in a good days work at the church, and then pack up and go home. Yet, if we listen carefully and intentionally, Jesus calls us to sail out once more, into the deep.

Now if you've had a chance to read our February newsletter, you know that soon we will have the opportunity to work with Bob Perry on our Memorial Garden. When I think about this garden, I don't think about it as a landscape project to make our grounds more beautiful; I think about it as a spiritual growth exercise. Many of you gardeners out there know what I mean. You've found the Spirit in your gardens, and that Spirit has strengthened you to the tasks you've needed to do. I'm hoping that as we approach the Lenten season, we will reflect on themes of creation, and of God's earth and our stewardship of it. I hope we will watch together "An Inconvenient Truth" and ponder where God's creation (not *our* planet, but God's planet) is heading. I hope that we will think theologically and spiritually about the soil and plants, and things *other than human beings*, that God created and declared "It is good." Can we bring life to a spot of ground where little has grown because asphalt has smothered it? Can we teach our children what strips the soil from its life giving nutrients? Can we celebrate the life of this congregation as we watch plants and trees grow and an area that looks lifeless come to life? Perhaps as we tend our garden, as we remember those who have tended this church for us to now inhabit, we will be witnesses of something happening here. I invite you to write down or share with me your spiritual reflections on this project (kind of like "Story Core" on the radio). And as we participate in this Lenten exercise, perhaps the community will stop and take notice and want to know more about the followers of Christ who are gathered in at this place.

This week I went into the Disney store because today we go to our goddaughter's birthday party, and at three years old, she is all about princesses. Playing on the big video screen was "Beauty and the Beast." I got very nostalgic, and my heart ached because I remembered when the girls were little and they first watched this movie. For months they memorized the songs and acted out all the parts. Seeing and hearing just a glimpse of the movie took me back to a time of closeness with my children and tender, shared experiences.

Today we share this sacred meal, Holy Communion. Through ritual we are taken back to a time when we remember that Jesus walked on this earth, that he called people to follow him, to do like he did, to live life a new way. And we reconnect with what is most important, most Holy, most life-giving, maybe most challenging about who we are as people of God. And we hear again the voice of the One who says: "Sail out into the deep; do not be afraid; you are going to gather in people and show them a new way of being."

People of God we are called to not give up; to give our all; to witness to the message of the living Christ whose whole life and death were given to heal, to feed, to reconcile, to call us to something more than we ever dreamed imaginable. And all the while Jesus says, "Do not be afraid...." And so we follow. Amen

