

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
 February 7, 2010 (Epiphany 5)
 Luke 5:1-11: Walking Away
 The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

We live in anxious and discouraging times don't we – natural disasters like the Haitian earthquake and the terrible death and destruction that follow. Poverty and oppression all over the news. Serious illness in our friends and family. Need surrounds us, everywhere we turn. And we're still following the stock market and the economic indicators, wondering about the possibility of retirement – even whether we'll have jobs tomorrow or not. It can get overwhelming, can't it – sometimes we go to bed at night so discouraged we don't know where to turn. And discouragement leads to fear, to depression – to a what's the use attitude that drags us down even further. And we talk of solutions but we can't muster the energy be part of the solution - to make the changes or look to new possibilities. We're stuck sometimes, aren't we. It's hard to find our way out of being so discouraged.

Well, today's gospel reading is about 3 discouraged men: fishermen– not recreational fishermen – but workers whose families went hungry if there was no catch. It was a bad morning for these men – they'd fished all night and caught nothing. Now it was the morning after a night of failure, they were tired, but they were washing and repairing their nets so they'd be ready for the next nights' work.

Maybe they noticed the crowd on the beach near where they were working. A big crowd: all listening to Jesus as he stood beside the lake – the people were pushing in upon him. He sees two boats at the shore and suddenly Jesus steps into Simon's boat and asks him to put out a little way from shore. And Peter does it.

From the boat Jesus continues to teach the crowds. Finally he is done and the crowds go home.

Now, isn't it interesting that there's nothing recorded of what Jesus said? Not one word. How do you think we might figure out what he's trying to tell the crowd?

Maybe we learn as much from what he does as from what he says –because then after everyone is gone, Jesus turns to Simon and tells him to put out into the deep water, and let the nets down for a catch.

The surprise continues: here's Jesus, a landsman, telling a professional fisherman how to do his business. Pretty outrageous, isn't it – and Peter answers Jesus right away by explaining the facts of life as a fisherman to him. It won't do any good – he says. We have worked all night – we've caught nothing – there's no point to it.

Jesus response: don't be afraid.

Haven't you ever been there? You do your best. You work hard. And the results are zero. The harder you try, the less you produce. I know this sounds familiar to each of us – haven't you ever been in a place where all your wisdom tells you – just give up? I have, and the last thing we need to hear when we are in this position is “try harder.” That can just shut us down, can't it.

Jesus' response then and now: don't be afraid.

Peter, James and John, they were not stupid men. They knew the lake, the ledges where the fish congregated, the kind of weather and the time of day when it was most likely to get a good catch. Their families had been working the lake for generations – but they did all they knew and came up empty.

Jesus says – try over there. Over there in the deep water – let your nets down for a catch. “Master, we have worked all night long” – Peter says. “We have done everything we should have done, everything we were taught to do by our fathers and their fathers before them. But we have caught nothing.” But then he says, “Yet...if you say so – I will do it and let down the nets.”

Why he agrees to do this we don't know. Maybe he did it because he was learning to trust Jesus. Maybe he did it to humor him – I'll show you – it won't work. Maybe it was because of something in Jesus' tone of voice. Whatever the reason, Peter agrees to do what Jesus asks of him.

We know the story from here – they threw the nets out from Simon's boat and took in so many fish that their nets break. Indeed they caught so many fish that John and James came alongside and helped load the catch – and the boats began to sink.

An amazing catch – made in deep water, taken where and when there should have been no catch. A catch counter to everything the culture knew and taught.

What might this whole episode suggest about how we live our lives, both individually, and especially today as we gather as a community of faith.

Let's remember what Simon first said to Jesus – “Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything.” That might translate into something like this: but we've always done it this way – and it didn't work. What's the point of trying it again?

Like Peter, we think we know our business too – but maybe we know it too well. And what happens: We get frustrated. We feel inadequate. We feel alone. We believe that what is being asked of us either as individuals or as a group will not pan out – and we don't want to try again – we don't want to risk one more disappointment. We don't want to go deep – because we're afraid. We're afraid we won't make it. We're afraid we'll look foolish. We're afraid of yet another failure. Don't you know people like this? Maybe we even fall into that trap sometimes – it won't work. I can't change. Nothing ever changes.

What a depressing way to live!

People have resources but don't use them. They have skills but don't develop them. Dreams but don't follow them. Gifts, but don't share them. They know their business and they are not about to be taught by anyone else. And they're locked in by their knowledge of their business. Afraid to risk. Afraid to reach out. Afraid to go beyond the familiar. But Jesus has a surprise for us.

Jesus tells us to go deep. Put out into the deep water – and let down your nets. And tells us not to be afraid.

A minister tells the story of his work in a small town in Canada – a young woman suggested to the Church Council there that they start a social club – one that could meet one Friday a month for special events like bowling, rotation dinners, card parties, tobogganing, theater, events like that.

Guess what the council said? You know.....

“We tried it before and it didn't work.”

And they were right – they had tried it. They had done their best several times in recent years and it didn't work. Nobody was interested. Nobody came.

But, to their credit, the council said, if she wanted to try it again – that was up to her. She had their blessing, but they also warned her not to be disappointed if nothing happened.

In those days the church had an average Sunday attendance of about 85 – forty of those folks were approaching or past retirement age, and about 30 were children. The first meeting of the new club had 10 people there. The second had 16. And they were all people between the ages of 18 and 40. The group continued for some time – they had a great time together and because of that time together many other lives in the community were touched. Everyone became more alive – more confident – more united. And church attendance rose in part due to the success of this group.

Go deep. Put out into deep waters and let your nets down for a while. Don't be afraid. And trust the spirit.

Sometimes we need to consider other options. Sometimes we need to risk another. Sometimes we need to go and do what our common sense tells us can't be done and to try it anyway. Sometimes we just need to head out into deeper waters and let down our nets for no better reason than Jesus has asked us to do so. Just like Peter did.

I've always liked Simon Peter – he's so like each of us, isn't he. He struggles with his discipleship just like we do. Sometimes he's right on the mark, sometimes he misses the point, sometimes he even denies knowing Jesus. But Jesus is so patient with him, so loving to him – in spite of some harsh words throughout the gospels – Jesus never gives up on him, does he - even with all his stubbornness, his slowness to “get the point”, Jesus sees through all that and re-names him Peter – upon this rock I will build my church. Why is that? Because more often than not, Peter comes through – willing to set the familiar aside and try new waters. Just because Jesus tells him to.

Today after worship we'll have our Annual Meeting – that great congregational tradition of combining the business of the church with a celebration of our life together. We're not unlike many churches: we have our challenges, but we also have the celebrations. And like most churches, too, often our challenges tend to outweigh our celebrations. Maybe this gospel story today has some lessons for us as we look ahead to our future here in Glen Ridge. Not the least of which is not to be afraid!

I always ask members of confirmation classes to attend the annual meeting – and then to complete a report on their observations. In preparation for the meeting I go over the ministries and committees of the church and go over the budget as well – what the line items mean, and something of what we're going to be talking about at the meeting. There's usually at least one confirmand who has an epiphany – that somebody has to pay the light or heating bill, that the pastors and the rest of the staff really are paid to do their jobs – we're not volunteers, and no, we don't really live at the church. And they are often surprised at how many people do volunteer to do the various tasks necessary for an active church. That's why I also require them to participate in the life of the church, both here and in the outside world, through doing service projects – they find out how much work it really does take to make activities happen, that letters do have to be hand stuffed in envelopes, address labels attached to them before they're brought to the post office, Annual Reports have to be collated and stapled for our meeting, tables don't get magically set up for the rummage sale or the Antiques Show, that our outreach programs

need volunteers to feed the hungry. There's a wide variety of ways they participate in the daily activity of the church through the year – and most of them find out, one, how much fun they can have working on these projects, and two, how much work really is involved. It's a great way to combine the being and doing of our faith for them and for all of us as well. Another big benefit is that it helps them and the adults they work with realize what it means to be a community of faith.

Then at the class following the meeting, we'll take some time to go over their reports – including questions like what was most interesting, most boring, what they'd learned about our church at the meeting, what they'd do differently if they were running the meeting – and what surprised them about the meeting. Many of the answers have been what you'd expect – all the money talk was boring. All the speeches were too long. How come we seem to fight over stuff so much?

But one year one spoke of wishing there was more celebration of our life together. And another was especially profound: one confirmand said, "I was surprised by how little more it would take from each of us to make this good church a great church." That led to a great conversation about money: Sunday School collections, how much they brought each week – or didn't bring each week. And how many service projects they'd done or hadn't done. They learned that stewardship was about sharing time and talent, as well as their treasure. And they learned that we're all in this together.

Listen to that one comment again: how little it would take from each of us to make this good church a great church. Those are the words of our young people – our young people who aren't stuck in the way we've always done things, who see this good church with new eyes and who see the promise of being a great church. And they have ideas how to make that happen and they don't hesitate to share them. Do we listen?

I am always impressed with their insights into the willingness to take a risk to try new waters – to go deep. I do hope we'll nurture that in them and in each other as we continue to face all the joys and challenges we share. I do hope we'll encourage each other to express our thoughts and ideas – joys and concerns – I do hope we'll listen to each other and work hard to not immediately shut down a proposal to move out into deeper waters. The annual meeting will be over in just a short time – but the work, the ministry - including all the joys, sorrows, challenges, celebrations, and the normal everyday activities of this church will continue. But we need to go deeper to expand our discipleship as Jesus calls us.

As those fishermen found out, going deeper brought them abundance they'd never, ever expected. Doing what it is that Jesus called them to do brought them riches they'd never thought would come. And so it is for us – as individuals and as church. Jesus came so that each one of us might have abundant life, a full and rich life, a life in which we know and experience and share the love of God – a love that conquers the sting of death, and ensures that in the end our labors aren't in vain, no matter how many days our nets may come up empty. And to assure us that we, like Peter, have to recognize that our knowledge and our experience is not equal to that of God. We have to recognize that God's ways really are superior to our own, that God's wisdom is greater, God's timing is better – God's counsel more life-giving than our own. We must acknowledge our need and God's ability and desire to meet that need. And listen to the voice of God that's always with us.

Our nets may come up empty for many days in a row – but if we are open to God – if we are willing to listen and try the new things God suggests – if we are willing to venture out into the deep water – or even if we are willing, because God asks us, to do over again some of the things we’ve tried before and given up on, our nets will in the end be filled – and filled so abundantly that they will threaten to break.

God is still speaking – God is able to speak through us – God is able to make our nets overflow. God is able to bring good news to the world through us – God is able and willing to help us – God wants to help us - and God calls us to share that message – that message of abundance from where before there was nothing.

So let’s go out into the deep water together – let’s catch each other when we flounder – let’s heed that outrageous call God makes to each of us into a fullness of life we never thought possible – a life individually and together in this church where God’s will is done. Let’s spread the nets and trust the spirit – together. Amen!

Let us pray:

Loving God, like the disciples before us, we sometimes feel discouraged – we work hard at what we do – we care for our boats – we tend our nets – yet sometimes our labor seems in vain. Help us not to be discouraged – but grant that we hear your voice and accept your direction and venture forth in obedience to your word. Guide us to the deep waters where the catch you have for us is waiting – and strengthen our hands for the work it requires. You call us today, as you called Peter, to follow in the path of Christ Jesus and to bring to you all who are in need of you. Pour out your grace upon us and help us to remember that is your purpose and your power to which we bear witness – not our own. As you filled the nets of the disciples, so we ask you to fill the nets we cast in your direction. Grant us a resurrection faith – a faith that is confidence in your care and your love and your future. May the words of our mouths, the work of our hands, the thoughts of our hearts glorify you now and forever. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.