

Where Are the Deep Waters?

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Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Preaching on:

Luke 5:1–11

There are two ways (so I'm told) to pilot a boat down the Mississippi River. The first is to know the location of every hazard that could sink a boat for thousands of miles up and down that river. We admire this approach—it's data driven, which we like. We've come to believe that information can save us, so the more the better. Bring it on!

But there's another way to approach the river. An old story tells it like this: Once a little boy asked a captain how long he'd been piloting his boat up and down the Mississippi. "Forty-four years." "Oh," said the boy, "then you must know where all the rocks are, all the shoals and sandbars." "No," said the pilot, "But I know where the deep waters are."

Where are the deep waters? How do we find them? How do we trust them? Knowing the rocks and navigating the deep waters are not the same thing. How many of us have read a self-help book, or a book about spirituality, or parenting, or leadership, or anything, and come away with a lot more info, but still feeling disconnected to it somehow? How many of us have ever fished all night long, but still caught nothing? Well, to begin with, our reading this morning reminds us that, just like that old Mississippi River boat pilot, Jesus knows where the deep waters lie and he's ready to lead us to them. The question is: Am I willing ready to follow?

The disciples said yes, and I'd like to know why because there were plenty of good reasons to say no. For example, in 1986 a couple of scientists interested in fisheries management in Israel got together to measure the biomass in Lake Kinneret (which is the modern name for the body of water called the Sea of Galilee or the lake of Gennesaret in our Bibles). They used echolocation to map out where all the fish lived in the lake. And they found that 80% of all the fish—of all sizes and all species—lived in the in-shore region of the lake at a depth of less than 10 meters. Go out more than a few hundred meters from the shore, where the lake gets a little deeper, and the population of fish drops dramatically. Go miles out, to the deepest waters, and there's almost no fish at all. That's an important data point for fishermen, wouldn't you say?

Now, they certainly didn't have sonar, but Peter and James and John and all the fishers down at the lake, from generations of experience, must have known where to fish—close to shore, where it's safe, and where all the fish live. And here comes Jesus—a carpenter's son with no connection to fishing—telling them to drop their nets in the deep water. Well, they would have known that the deep water was the last place you could hope to catch anything. Jesus was asking them to go fishing in the wrong spot!

Now, really, why would they do that? Would you be willing to do that? We've come to believe that failure is caused by one of three things: using the wrong technique, not trying hard enough, or not having sufficient data. But the disciples were using the right nets and the proper boats, they'd worked all night long (they weren't being lazy!), and they were in the right spot, right where all the fish lived, and they still failed.

Imagine with me what Simon Peter may have been going through that night. Maybe Simon Peter is just right on the cusp of realizing that his failure to catch fish has nothing to do with his technique, his equipment, his effort, his data. And Jesus comes along to nudge Peter's spiritual intuition that breaking through gridlock requires an imaginative risk. Maybe Simon Peter going out there to the deep waters wasn't just some act of pious obedience to the Son of God. Maybe he was beginning to see that it'd be foolish to stay stuck with the failures of the right spots. So, he risks the disruption of succeeding in the "wrong spots."

Rabbi Edwin Friedman once wrote, "Any renaissance, anywhere, whether in a marriage or a business

[or, I would add, a church], depends primarily not only on new data and techniques, but on the capacity of leaders [all of us!] to separate [our]selves from the surrounding emotional climate so that [we] can break through the barriers that are keeping everyone from ‘going the other way.’”

In other words, Beloved, church, what we’re doing here together—recovering from COVID, learning how to be back with one another in person again, learning how to grow and change and succeed in new ways, and reversing some of the downward trends that we’ve been stuck in—will not be motivated by having a “business plan.” It has almost nothing to do with gimmicks, almost nothing to do with whatever the latest church-guru has cooked up for publication, and almost nothing to do with hard work. The motivation for progress has everything to do with our emotional availability. Are we willing to leave behind the gridlock of where we are “supposed” to be for the risk of answering God’s calling out in those deep waters? Jesus seems to be saying to us, “This is the prerequisite to discipleship—a willingness to defy your own conventions and to risk success in the places that you previously never thought go.”

So, Jesus calls them out to the wrong spot, to the deep waters that they don’t know, and those fishermen catch such a haul that it almost sinks their two boats. Don’t let anyone ever tell you that failure is riskier than success. Sometimes success can capsize the comfort of our failures. Just look at what success does to Simon Peter: He falls to his knees in the boat in front of Jesus in the full realization of just how stuck he had been. And all the ugly emotions begin to pour out—shame and fear. “Go away from me.” But Jesus says, “Don’t worry, from now on you’ll be catching people.”

Rev. Debbie Blue once referred to this as a “potentially gruesome metaphor:” All those fish trapped, flopping, squirming, their little eyes bulging, their little mouths opening and closing, gills flapping, their little brains trying to comprehend what’s happened. But it really doesn’t have anything to do with the fish. That was part of Simon Peter’s realization—It’s got nothing to do with the fish; this is about me!

Jesus takes these fishermen as far away from the crowds on the shore as possible—to the center the lake. They withdraw there to the deep waters and let down their nets. And God shows up in abundance. God shows up so much that it almost sinks the boat. And now, after encountering God, Jesus tells them what ministry is really all about—not fish, but people.

This is like the in-and-out deep breathing of Jesus’ Gospels: God and neighbor, God and neighbor, God and neighbor. To get unstuck—to break the imaginative gridlock of times like these—requires us to turn away from safety into risk, to turn away from hard work and into God’s work, to turn away from my ego’s preferences and toward “the wrong spots,” to turn away from myself and to turn toward my neighbors.

And, Beloved, once we break away from the gridlock, once we get curious and adventurous, and begin to explore the deep waters, it will transform the way we pilot the boat of our lives: less anxiety, less

paralysis, less despair. We'll leave all the rocks behind, and let the deep waters carry us down the river.