

SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk (Delivered on Sunday, February 6, 2022)

Text: **Luke 5:1-11** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

One day, Jesus was standing by lake Gennesaret, and the crowd pressed in on him to hear the word of God. He saw two boats moored by the side of the lake; the fishers had disembarked and were washing their nets. Jesus stepped into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to pull out a short distance from the shore; then, remaining seated, he continued to teach the crowds from the boat.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Pull out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch.”

Simon answered, “Rabbi, we've been working hard all night long and have caught nothing; but if you say so, I'll lower the nets.”

Upon doing so, they caught such a great number of fish that their nets were at the breaking point. They signaled to their mates in the other boat to come and help them, and together they filled the two boats until they both nearly sank.

After Simon saw what happened, he was filled with awe and fell down before Jesus, saying, “Leave me, Rabbi, for I'm a sinner.” For Simon and his shipmates were astonished at the size of the catch they had made, as were James and John, Zebedee's sons, who were Simon's partners.

Jesus said to Simon, “Don't be afraid; from now on you'll fish among humankind.” And when they brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Reflecting with Pastor Donald Shenk:

“Go Deeper”

As often as I have read and studied these stories from the Bible – especially the ones involving Jesus and his disciples, I am still amazed that some detail of a story completely escaped me for the last 60 plus years! I think that truly is the beauty of the scriptures and the marvelous and miraculous ways God opens our eyes to glean something anew from these stories each time we encounter them. IF, that is, we are willing to go deeper and not just stay on the surface of the story and are willing to explore all of its possible meanings and implications. Of course, it can also mean that one should just pay much better attention when reading or listening to the scriptures!

In today's story, there were actually a couple of details that really surprised me as I was reading it for the umpteenth time this week. The first is that, as we begin our watery tale, we discover that the disciples had already come in from doing their day's fishing and were washing their nets out on the shore. They had given up, in other words, and were done fishing for the day when Jesus encounters them.

I think this is a detail worth exploring since I believe it points to the ways in which we humans often give up some-thing – a task, a project, a dream, a desire – because whatever way we were going about it wasn't working and so we decided to cut our losses and stop pursuing whatever that task, project dream or desire might be.

Here in our story with Simon, the task as well as the desire is to catch some fish. It's what he and his crew do, after all. They depend on it in fact.

But when Jesus tells him to return to his task, Simon's first response is that they've been doing everything they've always done – fishing-wise – all night long, in fact, and that they've caught nothing. I can imagine that he wasn't any too pleased to accept Jesus' instruction to go out and try again.

The other detail I completely mixed up with another instance within the Gospels where Jesus helps some of his disciples get more fish. Do you know what I'm talking about? It happens in John's gospel, where he places the incident near the end of his gospel, in the last chapter, in fact, when Jesus is manifested to the disciples after his crucifixion.

In John 21, the fisher folk Jesus had called and lived with for three years don't recognize him at first. In this instance, Jesus calls to them to cast their nets on the other side of their boat. When they do and it is filled to overflowing with fish, they finally recognize their Teacher and are overjoyed to have him with them again.

But here in Luke, the incident has a markedly different detail – rather than telling the fisher folk to cast their nets on the other side, Jesus tells them to “pull out into deep water” and then lower their nets for the catch.

Somehow, I had never noticed the difference between the two tales as they are situated in the gospels. Not only does this telling of the tale point out the disparity between the gospels and their writers, but it reveals something important we can take with us in terms of how we interpret this story for our own lives.

Jesus, in Luke's gospel, seems to me to not only be rewarding the disciples for their generosity in loaning him one of their boats so he could preach from the waters of the Gennesaret, but teaching them *right off the bat*, before they even decide to follow him, that there is much to be discovered when they go deeper – not only in terms of what they will catch, but what they will learn when they do so.

For it is from this point on in their journey with Jesus that He will ask them to look deeply not only within themselves but into the ways they perceive the world and the ways the world perceives him and the one who sent him.

And when they do occasionally understand that and go deeper with Jesus, they are rewarded with far more than nets full of fish, they're given the keys to the kin-dom of God which will help them unlock the doors for all of us who come afterwards seeking for deeper wisdom and deeper truth.

Going back to Simon, he who will be called Peter as he starts to figure out how to go deeper with the Christ, we are provided with a stand in for all those times we don't buy into something that comes to us from God but, hopefully, learn how to listen and go with it anyway.

Elisabeth Johnson, a professor at the Lutheran Institute of Theology in Cameroon of all places, notes that, "Simon is caught by surprise. In the midst of his ordinary daily grind, and in fact, after a particularly lousy night at work, he is encountered by one who changes everything... He initially protests Jesus' instructions to go out into the deep waters and let down the nets because he is convinced that the fish are not biting. They have worked all night and caught nothing. We can hardly blame him for his skepticism. How often do we resist Jesus' claim on our lives because what he is calling us to do seems too crazy, too impractical? How often do we avoid putting out into the deep waters of following and bearing witness to Jesus because we are convinced that we will not see any results? What might it mean for us to go deep-sea fishing with Jesus — to trust and follow him outside our comfort zones, to let go of our certainties, to have our lives radically reoriented?"

I've been thinking and praying a lot about going deep sea fishing with Jesus during this pandemic time and the seemingly small amount of fish that seem to be swimming in this small sea we call our church home. Why has God called us, this small school of fish, here to this place and what is God calling to us to do in this space and at this time?

As we heard last week at our Annual Meeting, our financial prospects have never been better even as our active church body has never been smaller. And I wonder, as I do each morning in my prayers, why is God prospering us so? What are we being called to do and to be as a church in this community? What possibilities are available to us to make a difference right here where we have been planted or plopped, if you want to continue the fish metaphor? Why has God stocked this particular pond with this particular group of fish folk?

We each have our own problems, our own challenges, our own disappointments, and discouragements. But still we come together whether in person or online to be the church. We come to hear God's word and to feel the love God has for us and to discover the love we have for one another and for all of God's children. And here we are called to go deeper.

My biggest hope for this year, along with a radical lessening of COVID throughout our world, is that we will be guided to how we can give of ourselves and of our gifts so that we may bring the light and the love we feel so powerfully as a part of this mighty band of believers to our community and our world. What projects might we embark upon? How might we use the extraordinary amount of monies designated for missions this year to create a change in the lives of people that are looking for hope and for that light and love we exude?

Let's heed Jesus' call to go deeper this year that we might find more fish to feed the multitudes physically as well as spiritually. Let's look up and say, "Ok, God, I'll listen. I'll follow. Where do you need what we have to give the most?" And let's share those ideas with

one another that we may strengthen our souls. Let's allow the wind of the spirit to fill our sails and direct this small but sturdy boat to where we can do the most good. Yes?

Recently, I received a book of poetry from the wonderful Scott L. Barton, and, wouldn't you know it, in its pages I found the absolutely perfect poem for today based on this gospel passage.

It's called **"Winning Combination."**

He had the winning combination
That's known by every congregation
When it's alive and full of spirit
That shows when someone comes to visit;

They found that he was energizing
By doing two things quite surprising.

He simply knew what went unheeded,
And simply did what people needed;
For news from God is what they hungered—
In words both brave, and full of wonder!
Thus he proclaimed, his words the blessing
They then received upon their pressing.

And next, he showed them such astounding
Largesse around them, so abounding,
The efforts of th'entire gath'ring
Were needed to haul in, so stagg'ring
The bounty each and all provided
When by his steering they were guided.

Perhaps belief is overrated,
And God's providing, understated;
So if you feel you're catching nothing,
Announce the news that's still so stunning:
Through all our hunger, wealth and sighing,
To each and all, Love's here! Supplying!

AMEN.