

“Deep Waters”

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on February 6, 2022
based on Luke 5:1-11*

The disciples have been fishing all night. They have caught nothing. Jesus tells them, "Put out into the deep water, let down your nets for a catch."

But Peter says to Jesus, "We've worked all night and have caught nothing ... But, hey, if you give the word, we'll give it another try." And they catch so many fish that they fear the net will break.

Would that the story ended there, right there with the tremendous catch of fish. It would be so much simpler if they had a night of massive failure and then had the good sense to listen to Jesus who said, "Push out into deep water." Yes, and "Bang," their nets load up.

The take-away would be -- If at first you don't succeed, try again.

"Master, we've worked all night long; we've caught nothing."

Geez, if there is a verse in the Bible one can relate to it's that one, right? I mean, that's the universal conundrum of life; that you and I have spent hours, days weeks, years sometimes, trying to change something, and what do we have to show for it?

We humans have a myth attached to this – the myth of Sisyphus, right. What is life like? It's rolling a huge stone up a hill all day long, only to have it roll back to where we started and we have to push it back up the next day all over again.

It's like when the church reopened and we celebrated then Omicron came, and we had to close our doors again.

On a personal level, your Sisyphian stone may be your obstreperous child, or your alcoholic brother-in-law, or someone at work who works with you, or something inside you like an obsession, or a loss that comes over you in waves years on, or some fear that won't ever go away.

"Master, we've worked all night long; we've caught nothing."

So maybe we should stop at verse 6, the verse about their success. I mean, I don't want us to leave worship this morning more depressed than when we got here.

But, no, the lectionary says we need to read on. There is verse 8. The story of Jesus' fishing trip doesn't end with the great catch of fish. No, it says, "But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' feet saying, 'Get away from me, Lord, I am a sinful man!' For he and everybody with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken."

Here's my question: Why would Peter have said such a thing? You'd think he would have been delighted, what with this huge catch after a futile night.

Dr. William Willimon says, "If you don't know why Peter said, 'Get away from me Jesus,' then you don't know about the dangers of fishing with Jesus."

Let's be honest, there's something about us which is on familiar terms with fishing failure, which wouldn't mind if this story ended in futility. Something about us is more comfortable with fishing all night without a bite, going to work all day with little to show for it. Why?

Because something in you, something in me, is content with Good Friday, but is scared half out of our wits by the uncertainty and surprise of Easter.

I remember my father was given a diagnosis of terminal lung cancer years and years ago. Then one morning they came into his hospital room and said to him, "your tumor is shrinking." The poor guy didn't know what to do with that news. I mean, he'd expended so much energy getting used to the idea he wasn't going to be around much longer. He felt he was being jerked around. And he was.

This is most evident in the world of work and higher-learning. I'm speaking of a fear of success. Achievement-phobia. It is connected with procrastination, perfectionism, the counter-intuitive impulse to quit when things are going well. This, turns out, is not that rare.

I had a roommate at the U of O who was fresh out of Idaho State Prison. He was very bright. He'd do very well with whatever he was studying, and then, 2/3 of the way through the term he would flame out. Every time. Term after term. He didn't lose his scholarship because the state of Idaho felt it was cheaper to support him in school than in prison. For, Rick (that was his name) it was a case of serial self-sabotage.

It's kind of the dark side of the fear of failure; the fear of falling from too great a height.

It can also manifest itself in people after they have achieved something great. Harper Lee had it happen to her after her first novel, *To Kill A Mockingbird* won the Pulitzer Prize. She ended up not publishing another thing until an old abandoned pre- *Mockingbird* manuscript surfaced near the end of her life and she let it see the light of day. You know, six weeks ago, after a vote of thousands of readers, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was deemed the best book published in the USA in the last 125 years. 125 years! What's an author to do after that?

In one sense, the book was a triumph. In another, its success was a tragedy – it killed Harper Lee, the writer. Had it been a middling success or a modest failure she could have regrouped and written something else. Maybe grown in a new way.

We can handle Good Friday. It's Easter, the deep waters of God's unmanageable, mysterious, powerful grace that scares us, makes us want to say, "Get out of here, Jesus." The harder work comes after success.

Let me tell you a story about a young Methodist woman, fresh out of seminary and raring to go.

"We are sending you to this old, inner-city church," said her Bishop. "There are some wonderful people there. You should know, however that they are pretty old; the church has been in decline for the last twenty years. There's just a handful of them left. They won't expect much ministry from you. Just go there, hold their hands, and do the best you can."

She gulped. So this was what her first position in ministry was going to look like. She had thought maybe she'd be an associate somewhere first – get some seasoning -- run a youth group or something first, not a whole church and have to bear the whole weight of it sinking on her watch. Well, she said to herself, "So be it."

In her initial meeting with her board, she could see the reality of what the bishop had described -- mostly older women, a room full of white hair and pastel dresses. "I have a gift for working with children," she told the board when they asked about her interests.

"Then the bishop has sent you to the wrong church," responded one of the women on the board, bluntly. "We are long past those years here."

Yet in the days that followed she noticed many children passing each afternoon outside her pastor's study window, children on their way home from school. They weren't the congregation's children, of course, but they were children. "God, show me a way to do ministry I am gifted to do, here," she prayed.

One afternoon she was visiting with one of her parishioners, an older woman. "Tell me about yourself," asked the young pastor. The woman told a story about her early life, her career as a pianist in vaudeville in her youth. "I played some of the best clubs on the east coast" the lady said with pride. "Count Basie, the Dorsey Brothers. I knew 'em all."

A light went on in the young pastor's brain. "Would you play for the church next Wednesday afternoon?" she asked.

"Sure, if I can get these poor old bony, arthritic hands to work," said the woman. "I'll take an extra dose of aspirin, I think I can be ready."

The pastor asked two women to make peanut butter sandwiches. On Wednesday, the four of them rolled the old piano out the double-doors of the Fellowship Hall --- doors which had not been opened in a decade.

Gladys sat down at the piano, out on the front porch of the Fellowship Hall, and began to play. She played a medley of hits from the Thirties, then moved into a little ragtime. By 3:30 a crowd of children had gathered. The pastor and her friends passed out the sandwiches.

Gladys moved from "In the Mood," to "Jesus Loves me." The children clamored forward. The pastor told them a story about the Galilean peasant who was also said to be the Son of God. Then she asked them to come back the following Wednesday.

A year later nearly a hundred children were crowding into that old church every Wednesday afternoon. On Sundays, Sunday School rooms were full of children being taught by a group of older women who thought that they were now too old for such work. A few of those children brought their parents. Where there was once death, there was now life. Easter.

And the Administrative Board met the next year and asked the Bishop to move their new pastor. "It's just not the same church," they said.

Jesus said, "Come on out in the deep water, cast your nets. And they said, in unison, "We'd rather not."

If you were an English major like me you may have been asked to read Herman Melville's short story, *Bartleby the Scrivener*. Bartleby has no personality whatsoever. He hates the minutest change. His maddening refrain when asked to do anything at all is, "I would prefer not to."

This kind of thing happens all the time. Remember the name, Alan Turing. If you're a fan of Benedict Cumberbatch you probably saw the film, *The Imitation Game*, all about how the nerdy genius, Alan Turing, broke the enigma code. Well, not only broke it, but figured out how to automatically translate every sensitive message the Germans sent in real time.

The movie amped his story up some – he didn't really do it all unassisted. Still, he did get terrible push-back garnering the support he and his cohort needed to do that. But then after the war he had an equally terrible time gaining the ground necessary to usher in the computer revolution he and others saw opening up before them. Add to that the fact that he was prosecuted by his own countrymen for being a homosexual.

This was the man who, with the help of a few other bright souls, may have shortened the war in Europe by more than two years saving over 14 million lives.

"Get away from me Jesus. Go home."

In November of 2008 Barack Obama was elected president. Remember how the Republican Secretary of State, Colin Powell, was bathed in tears. An African American man like himself had made it to the highest office in the land. "It's over," Colin Powell said. Meaning that 400 years of racism in this country had been turned back. "It's over," he said, and wept.

But a large percentage of the nation said, "Get away from me, Jesus." And it's still saying that. Louder than ever. Get away. Let us have our racist America back again. And it appears that a majority of white Christians in this country are saying that. Which makes me absolutely crazy. I mean, if we know anything at all about Jesus, right? But then Christians have always been the people who know the least about his heart. I say this having watched and listened to tons of other clergy closely for many decades.

In regard to the fact that America continues to struggle with racism and its Civil War legacy, William Faulkner is remembered to have said, "The past isn't over. It isn't even the past."

You know, the spiritual teacher, Eckhart Tolle was discussing Jesus's revolutionary concept of the kingdom of God some time ago, and he commented, parenthetically, "We have been repeating Jesus's words for 2000 years – who understands them? Maybe one or two Buddhists." That is NOT joke.

Let me close with this. It's one of my favorite stories in this regard. Shortly after World War II, during the reconstruction of Europe, the World Council of Churches sent three clergymen to several remote parts of the Balkans to see how their money was being spent. One of the three clergymen was Dr. John Mackie, President of the Church of Scotland.

The other two, nameless now, were members of a severe, pietistic denomination. One afternoon Dr, Mackie and the others went to call on an Orthodox priest in a small Greek village. The priest was overjoyed to see them and was eager to pay his respects. He produced a box of Havana cigars to show his pleasure.

Dr. Mackie took one, bit the end off and puffed it, delightedly. The other two refused saying they didn't smoke.

Feeling he had offended them and wanting to do better, the priest went off and brought back his best bottle of wine. Dr. Mackie took a glass, sniffed it, drank it down, praised it and asked for another glass. The other two, more horrified than before, drew back and said, "No thank you. We don't drink."

Later when the three men were on their way down the road again one of the two turned to Dr. Mackie with a vengeance and said, "Dr. Mackie, do you mean to tell us that you, president of the Church of Scotland, smoke and drink?" Dr. Mackie had all he could take. He turned to his compatriots and said, "No dammit, I don't. But *somebody* had to be a Christian!"

Don't forget Eckhart Tolle's injunction -- "We have been repeating Jesus's words for 2000 years – who understands them? Maybe one or two Buddhists."

The disciples had been fishing all night. They had caught nothing. So Jesus told them, "Put out into the deep water, let down your nets for a catch."

And Peter informed Jesus, "We've worked all night but have caught nothing ... But, okay, if you give the word, we'll give it one more try." And they caught so many fish that they feared the net would break.

And Peter, humbled to his core, said, 'Get away from me, Lord, I am a sinful man!' For he and everybody with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken."

And Jesus said, "Relax, Peter, I am going to make you into proper fishers of people ... if it kills me."

Amen