



“Living the Faith: Go Deeper”

Luke 5:1-11

April 28, 2019

Several years ago, a profile distributed by the Associated Press was picked up by news organizations throughout the country. Six members of my congregation sent me links or cutouts of the article, from four different news sources. The first paragraph certainly caught my attention: “It looked like a typical Sunday morning at any mega-church. Hundreds packed in for more than an hour of rousing music, an inspirational sermon, a reading, and some quiet reflection. The only thing missing was God.” The setting of this particular “Sunday Assembly” was Los Angeles, but the author observes that similar gatherings have begun in San Diego, London, Nashville, New York, and other cities across the world. Their purpose is not to bash believers, but to find camaraderie and community with like-minded people, drawn together by common concerns and a belief in unbelief. These “Atheist mega-churches” (as some are calling them) are a far cry from the harsh and bitter revilement of religion by many prominent atheists. No, this community is interested in a softer tone, with the tagline, “Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More.” The article describes the service, “attendees stomped their feet, clapped their hands...through rousing renditions of ‘Lean on Me,’ ‘Here Comes the Sun,’ and other hits. Congregants dissolved into laughter at a get-to-know-you game that involved...slapping the hands of the person next to them and applauded as members...spoke about community service projects. At the end, volunteers passed out cardboard boxes for donations as attendees mingled over coffee and pastries and children played on the floor.”ⁱ

Does the description sound at all familiar? The community being formed, the fellowship and friendship being enjoyed, the service and outreach to those in need? Even the motto feels very comfortable to those of us who profess faith in Jesus Christ and seek to follow his way in the world. Which is why this article has remained on my desktop. I’ve been struggling to give voice to the discomfort that knowledge of these gatherings created in me. And then I read this morning’s gospel text and it hit me. My discomfort is not with these gatherings of nonbelievers. My concern comes from how indistinguishable these gatherings are from what happens in many Christian churches. What does this say about the depth of our message? Have we traded accessibility for profundity, a gospel of ease in place of a difficult call to discipleship?

Last Sunday, we celebrated the joy of resurrection. Our sanctuary was filled to overflowing with worshippers. It was not hard to see the beauty of the gospel or sense the hope of new

life. This Sunday, we begin a new series on some of the most memorable and challenging teachings of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel. I have titled the series, *Living the Faith*, because this is the consistent thread that runs like a ribbon through Jesus’ teachings in this gospel. Being a follower of Jesus is all about living his way in the world, about getting our words and our actions in proper alignment, about following through with our best intentions and boldest commitments. It is about joining our lives to God’s work. It is a transformative, life-changing journey.

Take for example our gospel reading this morning. It begins with a dialogue between Simon and Jesus. Jesus has just finished teaching and speaking to the growing crowds of people from out on the boat, and he turns to Simon and he says, “Put out into the *deep* water for a catch.” Simon’s response had to be one of restrained frustration. “Sir, we have been fishing all night and have caught nothing.” In other words, “Listen buddy, we do this for a living, not just on the weekends. Maybe you should head back to the carpentry shop.” And yet, Simon chooses to row out into the deep water, and the rest is history. Nets bursting and boats sinking with fish, Simon falling on his knees before Jesus, the disciples called and commissioned for ministry, following a man they hardly know into a completely unknown future. Everything left behind. Nets and boats and a fresh catch of fish. Families and careers and a lifetime of training. Safety, comfort, and a stable life.

But first, before the catch, before the confession, before the call, these fishermen must leave something less tangible behind. The decisive moment comes when Simon agrees to leave the shore behind and venture into deep water, obeying a command from Jesus. With that, he and the other disciples make the decision to leave behind preconceived notions and ingrained ideas. It is this leap of faith, this decision to trust, that makes everything else possible. It starts with leaving the shallow waters of “that’s the way it works, that’s the way it has always worked” and entering the deep wells of new possibility.

There is a lesson for us here.

At no time in the history of the Christian church has the danger of shallow faith been more pressing. As one theologian has said, “The passionate call of Christ is often trivialized into an invitation to join a religious club that meets for tea and conversation [or entertainment] on Sundays.”ⁱⁱ This is why gatherings of nonbelievers united by unbelief can look so much

like the Christian church, because *we* have too often chosen to remain in the shallow end of the pool, where everything looks the same. Feelings of joy and contentment, a desire to do good for others, a wish for friendship and community. All good things, and yet...aren't we all searching for something *more* than this? Something deep and life-changing? Some encounter with holiness and significance? I think this is why you have chosen to be in this sanctuary instead of in front of your television or out to brunch. It is the conviction that something deeper is happening here.

Please note that Jesus does not offer these fishermen seven easy steps to successful living or a simple playbook for happiness. What he offers is a bewildering, challenging, frustrating call to depth. I think of Madeline L'Engle, one of the deepest religious thinkers I know of, who wrote: "Those who believe they believe in God but without passion in the heart, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, and even at times without despair, believe only in the idea of God, and not in God (himself)."ⁱⁱⁱ What we have in Jesus Christ is not a palatable, smooth, easy pathway to faith but a deep call to discipleship.

Cast your net out deeper.

We can choose to skim the surface of faith, to take in a little here and there, say our prayers and come to church and check the boxes on our religious to-do list. Or we can go deep. We can live into the profound promises of faith and we can get lost in the words of scripture.

I want to say something about that—about the words of scripture, on this day when we present brand new Bibles to our kindergarteners and celebrate the ministry of Vacation Bible School. I contend that the greatest challenge to theological depth in our churches today is not biblical illiteracy. It's not that we don't know how to read the Bible. It is, instead, biblical dust-gathering. Deep faith requires study, prayer, and practice. It requires leaving behind surface level assumptions of scripture in favor of deep pools of engagement. We must reclaim these sacred stories of faith and rescue them from interpretations that privilege hatred or division or exclusion or self-righteousness. We can only counter such destructive use of the Bible if we know what the book really does say. Our effectiveness in spreading the news of a loving and gracious God is entirely dependent on how deep we are willing to go.

It is time that churches like ours demonstrate to the world that there are deeper wells of religious commitment than the shallow pools of small-minded pronouncements that flood our senses. We owe it to this city and this culture. We owe it to those who long for something more and aren't satisfied by trivial superficiality. We owe it to the one who calls us to a faith of profound depth.

I want to suggest that this community of faith is uniquely situated and perfectly poised to respond to this call with bold

commitment. While there may be much about which we do not agree, we are united in the truth of the gospel *and* its call to live the faith beyond the safety and beauty of the sanctuary. While others may demand absolute uniformity, we find meaning in the diversity of how that call is embodied. Within the part of Christ's body that is Second Presbyterian Church, there are those who serve God by urging people of influence to remember the poor and the hungry, there are those who offer bags of groceries and a kind word on a weekday afternoon, there are those who teach children, who visit the elderly, who advocate for the marginalized, who open a vein to provide life, who welcome the stranger, who grow vegetables, who build ramps, who pray for the congregation, who raise voices and bells, who witness to the love of Jesus Christ and invite others to deeper relationship with him. This is not an "either-or" congregation, and we were never called to an "either-or" way of being. Thank God we are a "both-and" place of ministry.

The time has come for the church of Jesus Christ to put aside divisive platitudes and smug self-righteousness and live out what we proclaim and profess, to choose a theology of depth and profundity in place of the simplistic messages that aim only for ease—eight simple steps to knowing God's plan for your life. I have grown weary and frankly fed-up with a so-called gospel message that does nothing more than mimic the polarization that exists in our culture, choosing sides and shouting our perspective while covering our ears. We've somehow substituted the God-given purpose of the church with allegiances to human perspectives. I am equally wary of dazzling theatrical displays that cover a shallow message of self-centeredness that echoes our culture's obsession with the cult of me.

We are different because we follow Jesus Christ. Our faith matters because it transforms our priorities. This is what the next generation is waiting to hear. Not that faith is easy, but that it is important, that it offers purpose and meaning beyond self-advancement and thin definitions of success. We will discover this truth best by living it out, just as we learn more about God's call on our lives by serving others than reading books or listening to motivational tapes. Just live the faith, and watch as it becomes a deeper part of who you are. In order to fill the nets, we're going to have to leave the shore in search of deeper waters. Brothers and Sisters at Second Presbyterian Church, the time has come for us to dive in.

ⁱ <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/11/10/atheist-mega-churches/3489967/>

ⁱⁱ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. p. 182.

ⁱⁱⁱ Madeline L'Engle, *Walking On Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*, Shaw Books (5th Edition, 2001).