

SERMON
“Into the Deep”
Becky A. Hebert
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St. John’s Chapel UCC

Isaiah 6: 1-8, (9-13)

Luke 5: 1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon. **Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.** Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, son of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching people.” When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Here ends the readings from Holy Scripture!

SERMON

Certainly, this church is willing to get behind what will make this church grow. You told me during the search process that you wanted your church to grow. You still tell me this. I take you at your word that you are serious about this. I also believe you are an impressive group of people that can do anything to which you set your minds—so let's set our minds to realizing that if you want growth, it depends on every member of this faith family making **the decision to get serious about their faith.**

We, note I say we, can make this church come to life and be a vital force within this community. It's really a matter of how bad we want it. How badly do we want to keep the United Church of Christ, our denomination, within Springfield? How strongly do we believe in that for which the United Church of Christ stands? I know I would like to see to it that Springfield has the choice of a denomination that believes in the right of every individual to form their own theology, that encourages its members to think, that encourages us to accept others who are different from us, even when our beliefs differ...a denomination that encourages us to love each other in spite of our differences (to be inclusive)...a denomination that does not try to shame us into being obedient to its idealized standards of rights and wrongs—but encourages us to explore what it means to be respectful, loving, hospitable, and courageous in our struggle for justice. I believe in these things very, very much. I think they stand at the heart of Jesus' teachings. I also think you must, or you wouldn't be here.

Therefore, we must make some big time commitments here today. Do some powerful mind setting. Yes, today, for we have put it off for as long as is safe.

Yes, I know we are tired. God knows we are tired. After all, we have been out all night and caught nothing. We need our rest. Why continue to break our backs when obviously there is

nothing out there to catch? It's hopeless. We're doomed. Plus, I'm tired. I've called on and visited my share of folk, and now it's someone else's turn. Proclamation of the good news is simply going to have to be somebody else's job. I don't like to call on people. I don't like putting myself out. Then there's the, "I don't know how to's," and the "it makes me nervous," "or I don't have time." I love the "I'm retired," as if you get to retire from God. When you sign on to be a Christian, it carries a lifetime agreement, a lifetime covenant. I've heard 'em all. I'll take that back. There's bound to be some new ones to come along before all's said and done. God might even welcome a few new ones, for God is more than likely sick and tired of our old excuses.

Have you ever noticed how our excuses often surface from the bowels of our unworthiness? From Moses to Peter, the Bible records a long history of **people's buried feelings of unworthiness striking them with severe force when they stand in the presence of God**. Moses, from his unworthiness, says, "I'm not the person for the job. No one will believe me! I'm not a good speaker. I've got a speech impediment. I am a nobody God, who just wants to remain a nobody." Peter says, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

There was this wonderful article by Robert Karen in the *Atlantic Journal*. It's entitled "Shame." It's a story about a mathematics professor in his fifties who likes to think of himself as dynamic, intelligent and a debonair lady's man. He's unmarried and, at the moment, "between lovers." He stands on a subway platform eyeing an undergraduate. He sees that his gaze is making her uncomfortable. He even feels a twinge of shame over his intrusion, but not enough to stop. He files his behavior under "manly aggression" and keeps on staring. Then a searing thought quickly enters his mind, so quickly he won't even remember it later. The idea seems almost to have been waiting there like a hot coal, and after stumbling upon it and getting singed,

he flees in panic. He looks away from the young woman, buries his head in his paper and seeks out a separate car when the train comes in. For the rest of the morning he feels listless and down. He doesn't want people near him and growls if they press. He works methodically, waiting for the unnamable discomfort to pass.

The idea that scorched his very being was an image of himself, all too believable, as a hungry, unhappy loner. A man who has wasted his youth and is incapable of lasting attachments, staring forlornly at a woman who could not possibly be interested in him. The shame the image evoked was too hot to handle.

So he buries his shame behind a trumped up façade. Others flaunt theirs as excuses, for they would rather remain an unworthy nobody in the big scheme of God's realm than tackle the discomfort of the challenges God lays before us.

Many psychologists now believe that shame, feelings of unworthiness buried or flaunted as our excuses, is the preeminent cause of the emotional distress and violence of our times. Yet, it is seldom talked about, because we live in "pain avoidance" times. And shame, feelings of unworthiness, is about as painful as our emotions get. Guilt is bad enough. When we think we have clearly done something we should not have, it's painful to own up. But when we think we have not just done something bad, but that we are bad, undeserving and unusually insecure about who we are—that's deep down painful stuff.

And our culture teaches us not to go there. Our culture teaches us to value what makes us feel good and to avoid pain. Now, I am in no sense promoting the refusal of pain medication, or using pain in self flagellation as a means of religious discipline as reportedly Pope John Paul II did. Unnecessary pain makes no sense to me, but the pain of going into the deep to unleash our shame is necessary. We must first unearth our shame in order to be healed and liberated from it.

Jesus says to Peter, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch. We can fish all night, wear ourselves out trying to be a fisher of men and women, but until we go into the deep, our efforts will bear little fruit.

It’s painful to have our sense of self exposed. It’s even unhealthy to have our shield of protection from over exposure removed too quickly. Yet, totally unacknowledged, shame grows within us as a diseased virus that eats away at us, and **negatively influences those around us.**

At the Department of Spirituality meeting (a group made up of all those who have taken the Spiritual Development course) about two weeks ago, they talked about having a place where one can feel safe unzipping their gut...exposing their shame...their low self esteem. No one tells you in Spiritual Development that you have to do this. It is just inevitable for **people’s buried feelings of unworthiness to strike them with severe force...when they stand in the presence of God.**

Peter says, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” Simon-Peter wants to send Jesus away, for in the light of Jesus’ power, he sees his negative self image, his shame, his sins...too clearly. Isaiah, confronted with the presence of God, let out a woeful cry, “Woe to me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.”

Diana Butler Bass, in *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, notes that the churches that are growing...are those that pay attention to people’s spiritual needs—who make opportunities for people to be exposed to and to experience God’s presence. She doesn’t say it, but I think when we go into the profound depths of our souls, we wrestle loose the shame, the negativity. We let angels touch our wounds with the hot coals of healing. And the vibes of negativity that influence those around us become vibes of love.

This is what making the decision to get serious with our faith is all about. It is not about just professing a faith. It is about more than doing deeds of charity. Even secular institutions like the United Way or the Rotary Clubs do acts of charity. It is about more than doing justice. Even the Sierra Club and Green Peace do justice.

Micah 6:8, one of my favorite passages of scripture, says, “What does God require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” Doing justice is important, doing acts of kindness is important, but until we walk humbly with our God, there will still be an unhealthy negativity emoted—that breeds negativity and shame.

It is no small accident that Luke puts this evangelical story (the story of how the good news would be spread), in the context of overcoming the fear of Peter’s sinfulness **striking him with severe force the minute he knows he is standing in the presence of the Divine**. All the evangelism in the world will not work until an atmosphere of the spiritual is emoted.

People tell me that there are people who do not sign up for Spiritual Development because it scares them. They do not want to cast their nets into the deep, dark scary waters. Or they do not believe in meditation, candle gazing, or any other hocus pocus they think “spiritual development” is about. And yet in this course, we are only about seeking the presence of God. You have to seek God’s presence before you can walk humbly with God. And yes, that can be scary. But as Jesus said to Peter, “Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching people”—for the atmosphere you emit will reek with God’s presence.

So what do you say? Are you ready to make the big commitment to put out into the deep waters to let your nets down for a catch? Lent is just around the corner. Could there be any better Lenten observance? And when you row ashore, you will be ready to leave everything, especially your fears and shame, to go on the adventure of all adventures with Jesus.

Amen.