

Runnymede United Church
THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
February 7, 2010
'Into Deep Water'
Psalm 138; Luke 5: 1-11

In Dreams from My Father, Barack Obama wrote about a neighbourhood Christmas party that occurred while he was working as a community organizer in Chicago:

“It was during such times when familiarity or wariness dissolved the lines between organizer and those that I was supposed to be organizing that I learned the most about the work I had chosen. I learned ... that beneath the small talk and sketchy biographies and received opinions, people carried within them some central explanation of themselves, stories full of terror and wonder, studded with events that still haunted or inspired them. Sacred stories.

I really resonate with this notion of “sacred stories” that lie beneath the self-interest related to issues that often polarize us. These are the stories where we can really find one another and experience our shared interest and humanity (sacred means “made whole”). I know their power to unite and the time and attention required to access them. And I know the suffering that can come from being disconnected from our own stories. In a world of sound bytes and short attention spans, what can we do to reclaim our stories...?”

Fish and fishing. A fish story. One of our stories:

That flat-bottomed fishing boat... can you see Simon sitting on the rim, grumbling. An entire night out on the water and nothing to show for it but weariness!

Simon – most of us know him better as Peter - had grown up on the lake, knew every fishing spot, all the habits of its watery denizens. Fishing was his life.

Then, lately, there'd been distractions. Something was happening around Galilee: he'd heard of a rabbi's miraculous deeds, had even witnessed the healing of his own mother-in-law.

That morning, Simon, talking with comrades cleaning nets after their frustrating night's work, spotted the rabbi, surrounded by crowds. Jesus looked around and asked, 'How's it going?'

Simon's companions stooped over their nets, scraping off seaweed, muscles throbbing from the night's exertion, not a minnow to show for it. Simon's bloodshot eyes glanced at Jesus. 'Seen better nights,' Simon replied, tersely.

Jesus walked towards him and stepped into his boat. 'Would you put out a little way?' Jesus asked. 'It might be easier to teach from a boat.'

'Why not?' Simon thought. 'Might as well put it to some use.' So he pushed out, maybe three metres, and sat, listening, watching. People on the shore seemed transfixed by the rabbi's words, touched by his presence.

As the heat intensified, Jesus concluded his teaching, and suggested Simon take the boat out into

deep waters to cast the nets. 'But we've been fishing all night - caught nothing,' Simon answered.

He felt like saying: 'What's going on? We've fished here all our lives; we know what we're doing. It's mid-morning. Whatever fish there are - and there weren't any last night - have retreated to the bottom to escape birds. Besides, it's dangerous out there, when we're hot, exhausted. What do you, a carpenter from Nazareth, know about fishing?'

It's frustrating when you've been doing the work you know well, had a bad night - and someone offers advice. Imagine Simon's tone!

Jesus gazed calmly at him.

Sigh... These men knew what they had to do. They grasped the oars, and steered the boat towards the deep water. 'Now let down your nets,' Jesus said. They looked at each other, embarrassed for this man. Oh, my! Doesn't he stop? Shrugging their shoulders, they cast the nets.

Suddenly, ropes tightened. The men held on as hard as they could, muscles screaming at the effort. 'The nets are breaking!' Simon hollered. Thank goodness for James and John, close at hand. Without them, the boat would have capsized. The water quickened with silver and red as they tried to haul a writhing mass on deck. Everyone toiled to contain the catch, everyone except Simon, who stood, staring at Jesus.

'Who are you' he wondered, 'that you command the fish in the sea?' And then, understanding, he threw himself down and cried, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.'

Both boats were silent, except for fish thrashing on the planks. Eyes locked on Simon, as Jesus extended his hand. 'Don't be afraid' he said. 'From now on you will catch people.'

And Simon, soon to become Peter, understood that life would never be the same.

Imagine being on that boat. Imagine what was going through their minds when they heard a person whom they did not know tell them how to fish and then call them to another life?

What are the deep waters into which Jesus suggests we – you and I - cast our nets? Are they unexpected places, where a friend is dying, or a family is struggling with job loss and distress, or a relationship is troubled or you're trying to respond to global issues like climate change. Into deep waters. It's scary! But Jesus says: 'Imagine the abundant life that can come, if you go there.'

Peter and his companions returned to shore, left boats, catch and everything else, and followed Jesus. Can we do likewise? Or do we respond: 'Look! We're tired. Some of us have been fishing a long time. We don't have energy to put into half-baked ideas, from someone who doesn't understand. What we really need is to get organized to do what we're already doing, better....'

Do we not often respond as Peter does: 'Done that. Been there. It won't work...'? People are practised in finding reasons not to go into deep waters, not to let down a net. What if it's time to try a new way, to change the way we fish, when and where we fish?

We know deep waters surround us. Going there can be daunting, but also sustaining. There, God asks us to reach out to suffering, to take care of each other, to practise kindness, care for God's world, spread God's love. The waters are deep; the moment is now. Can we reply: *If you say so...* Send me to care for those I know and those I don't know; send me to teach and heal and feed. Send me to volunteer at a hospital or homeless program. Send me to find ways to live lovingly. Send me to pray. Send me...

This sacred story reminds us that in life, God can be calling us to change direction, to head out - in faith.

'Do not be afraid', Jesus said. 'Put out into deep water.' Before they knew it, they were in over their heads. But the disciples never forgot this awesome experience – and, later, in the midst of persecution, fear, hiding, and loss, it strengthened and guided them. The sign of the fish became a subversive, prophetic, symbol of faith for the early church; as the children heard, the letters of the Greek word 'ichthus' - fish, came to stand as a code for the Greek phrase describing "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour"

We can be proud of that prophetic tradition visible in the shape of our own United Church crest, reminding us of the call, into deep waters.

Today, God invites you and me to walk with Jesus, to a place where the Spirit's deep waters can restore and remind us of one who calls us to try a different way.

Is it time now as this congregation considers its upcoming Annual General Meeting to follow Jesus' way, perhaps by considering questions like these:

What has this congregation done well this year?
Where do you see the Holy Spirit moving here?
What new territory might you venture into?
What are your sacred stories?

Moving into deep waters: one of the sacred stories that can connect us and make us whole. Thanks be to God. Amen

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