

Deep Water Fishing

2- Unbinding Your Heart

1 Kings 19:11-13

Luke 5:1-11

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First Sunday in Lent

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I am not much of a fisherman. But I was part of an incredible fishing trip a few years ago. Gayle's father decided it was time to take his grandsons, son and son-in-law on a once-in-a-lifetime, guys' fishing trip. So we met in Nashville and then all flew from Nashville to northern Canada. After several plane changes, each plane smaller than the one before, we finally arrived in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan and Selwyn Lake, landing on the water in a bi-plane. Selwyn Lake Lodge was the only man-made structure on this vast beautiful 25-mile long glacial lake, and we were the only guests in this the only lodge on this remote wilderness lake that stretches up into the Northern Territories.

Every morning we met our native American guides who had grown up around that lake and who knew the good fishing and trapping spots backward and forward. We would get into their simple open hull boats to motor up that long lake to just the right spot. When we cast our lines out in the places they indicated one after the other from the deep waters of that lake, we would pull one immense four-foot long Northern Pike up after another. The fish seemed to be begging to jump into our boats. When it came time for lunch we would pull up to a remote island, the only boat on these waters, build a fire and cook as much fish as we could eat. In the evening the lodge prepared some of the most delicious gourmet fish dinners we had ever tasted. Then we sat out late into the evening watching the northern lights sparkle, telling stories and marveling at where we were and what we were doing. Life was good on Selwyn Lake. (This is a difficult image to paint today as Japan has been ravaged by nature's fury in an earthquake and tsunami. We need to remember them.)

Jesus once led Simon and a few of his friends on such a fishing expedition. Jesus turned a night of no fish being caught into a day of such an abundant catch that the nets almost broke from the weight of all those fish.

It is like that sometimes in Church, when God is being sought and followed; suddenly we are caught up and in the zone. When God's Spirit gets hold of a Church, amazing things happen. Where before there seemed to be little life, little risk, little response, little joy, like Elijah out in the storm, on the run, and God asks "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Suddenly God is there surprisingly in the small quiet voice; suddenly the fish are jumping all around, almost begging to get into the boat.

I am convinced we are in such a moment here at South Highland. God's Spirit is alive and at work among us in these days. This is a season of great need and of great opportunity. Can't you just sense the energy and the expectation?

Great mission outreach is going on, as we heard throughout the month of February, with our Witness Season as we are reaching out with the love of Jesus Christ locally and round the world. Great study of God's Word is going on as over 100 of you are participating in reading daily the One-Year Bible throughout this year. Great ministry to youth is going on as we saw a few weeks ago on Youth Sunday as our Youth led us in incredible and inspiring worship, with power and grace, and as we are welcoming Doug Barr, our new Youth Director among us. Great teaching of children is going on as our little ones are learning the stories of Jesus and seeing faith modeled at home. Last week we were delighted as our newly re-organized Children's Choir led us in joyous music in praise of God. And now as we are entering Lent you are taking part in a special experiment called *Unbinding Your Heart*. Over 300 of you are experiencing being part of a Small Group, and even more of you are using the daily Unbinding Prayer Journals on your own. God is doing great things among us for which we are most grateful.

Let me ask you though – what do you think is the secret of the strong movement of God among us? Do you think it is our superb organization, our state of the art communications, our cutting edge buildings and facilities, and our exemplary location? I offer those examples a bit tongue in cheek because all who are involved in some level of leadership and some level of participation here are aware of the challenges all of those pose for us. We are making progress in all those areas; but, no, the very existence of nice clean ladies rest rooms is not the secret of the great current movement of God's Spirit among us.

I want to let you in on the little secret. It is, in fact, the secret to this Church's past and present and future. It is how and why this Church has continued to have a vital and vibrant ministry for the past 123 years. We have been sustained through seasons of schism and war and vast social upheaval and cultural change here in the most eclectic, unusual, and densely populated neighborhood in the State of Alabama by one thing – our secret is prayer. There have always been people here who have been praying. There have always been people here who have been asking God what God wants to us to do, asking God to work his great miracles in and through us and to show us what we are supposed to be doing next.

It is not that we are the most devout, fervent pray-ers of all time. Many of us are pretty clumsy pray-ers. It is simply that we are praying. It is that over its long history South Highland has taken prayer seriously. I attribute the successes of the ministries I mentioned above to the work of fervent prayer that is taking place here at South Highland. Amazing things take place when we take time to talk to God, listen to Jesus, take him at His word and try His way. Like this early fishing trip, Jesus goes on with a few of the disciples.

I

Jesus is out along the lakeshore early on in his ministry. As Luke tells the story, he is already having a powerfully positive magnetic effect upon people. Great numbers of folk are coming over to hear him along the lake shore, so many, in fact, that he has to step into an available fishing boat pulled up along the shore that belongs to a man named Simon, who was on shore cleaning his empty nets. Those empty nets say it all. Simon had been out all night long fishing, which was his livelihood, but with no positive effect. No fish.... No future. So Jesus uses his open-hulled, wooden boat as a pulpit, pulling back a little off the shore where he can be seen and heard by the crowds who are pressing close to take in his every word--about something more than fish.

II

We do not know what he says that day. Likely, it is similar to the sort of things he said in his Sermon on the Mount or Sermon on the Plain, nearby, about the value of every human being in God's sight, about this Kingdom of God breaking in and sparking a different value system than the Kingdom of Caesar. In God's new Kingdom, Jesus calls us to love our enemies, to pray for those who take advantage of us, to turn the other cheek, to give to those who are in need, to forgive and live as his disciple. He will later in Luke tell them, "A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher,"¹ thus setting himself forth as our model.

After what appears a very effective period of such teaching the crowd, Jesus turns to Simon with a strange request, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon offers a reasonable protest, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing." It is a response we hear frequently in the Church, isn't it? But we have tried having youth choirs and lock-ins and contemporary music. We have tried renewal events and intense studies on Bible and Doctrine, and nobody much comes. We do not seem to be able to pull in a crowd like back in the glory days of 1958.

And there is sociological truth to such statements. This Church, any established Church in the United States these days, does not just automatically fill up simply by unlocking the doors and announcing the time of worship, like it did in the 1950's. Those were days when everybody went to Church. If you were an American, you most likely went to Church. Those were the days of the vast Sunday School expansion building programs, as all those babies like me--born after the Second World War--needed a place to come and learn about God. Our parents, who had lived through the horrors of that War, were determined to do everything they could to create a solid, stable environment for their children. So yes about any church program that was at least half baked in those days took off.

But then came the social upheavals of the 60's, Vietnam, racial unrest, civil rights, social and sexual revolutions, young people questioning the established order, often for very good reasons, i.e., Watergate, Tail hook, and the like, and suddenly Church was not automatically a growing, thriving thing. Especially among our Protestant Mainline denominations, which have, as Martha Grace Reese points out in her book we

are studying, lost over 50% of our members and cultural influence in the period of time since the 60's.

The Church is not as significant a factor in our American culture these days. That is simply a fact. The Constantinian Era is over. One cultural sign of our new diminished place in the social order is the observation that there is not a single Protestant among the nine Justices of the United States Supreme Court. Now, this is a difficult reality for us Presbyterians especially to absorb--we who continue to put out quite a few lawyers, we whose colonial era leader, John Witherspoon, was the only clergy who signed the Declaration of Independence, we who have historically been such makers and shapers of public policy in this country. As an institution, the Mainline has become Sidelined. That is simply the way it is. Vast social and cultural change has affected us and we have to be church and minister in some new and different ways.

Now our changed place in the social pecking order is not necessarily a bad thing. The early Church, you recall from the Book of Acts, was a sidelined, marginalized group. Chiefly, our new status means we simply have to be more intentional about who we are and what we do, more shaped by Jesus' own teachings and way of ministering. The Gospels tell us it is enough to be like Jesus. And this brings us right back to prayer. We have to be more prayerful and more dependent on prayer to shape and transform us. Prayer is our great secret weapon!

Martin Luther said, "We cannot come to God except through prayer alone, for he is too high above us." Friedrich Heiler said, "Prayer is the central phenomenon of religion, the very heartstone of all piety." And Soren Kierkegaard said, "The best help in all action is to pray, that is true genius, then one never goes wrong." The Apostle Paul said, "Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."ⁱⁱ

The Apostle James said, "Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."ⁱⁱⁱ

When Simon took Jesus at his word, even though it did not seem likely that any fish would be found, he put the boat out into the deep water, let down his nets, and the fish just started tumbling in. Simon, who knew these waters and knew this was no natural phenomenon, was terrified when he saw so many fish being brought in--not only to his boat--but to his partners' (James' and John's) boat, too because he knew they were in the midst of something supernatural. "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" And Jesus quieted him down, saying to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." Jesus was about something more than fish here. The end of this story is the beginning of discipleship for Simon, James and John. Soon as they bring their boats ashore, they leave them and follow Jesus. An amazing catch that afternoon

because they have taken Jesus at his word, put out into the deep places and let down their nets for a catch.

III

Though Simon is not enthusiastic or optimistic about the chances of anything significant happening, he pushes off into the deep, swayed by the presence of Jesus, and willing to do what he asks. ‘I will let down the nets.’ He puts himself and his boats in position to receive what God wants to give.

This is what I want to ask you to do over these weeks of our Unbinding Journey. I want to ask us all to open our senses to receive what God wants us to do. I hope we will grow in our trust that just maybe God will speak to us through the Bible as we read it daily and reflect on its claim upon us and its challenge to us. As we listen to this Word, God shows us things. And as we pray, we create some clear space where God can do the work God intends among us...space where we can give to the wind thy fears. Hope and be unafraid!

IV

What happens when Simon and his friends put down their nets at the command of Jesus is nothing short of miraculous. That is what we all need: God’s miracles in our lives. And that is exactly what God does. He makes a way where there is no way, a path through the desert, and the sea, and through unexpectedly difficult places in our lives.

As we move ahead in this *Unbinding Our Heart* journey, as we seek to become unknotted, unstuck, unbound of the many entanglements and distractions which trip us up in life, I want to encourage us all to a new and deeper level of prayer. Seeking simply what God is saying for you to do and then acting upon it. I want to invite you sincerely and genuinely to pray. And I want to ask you to begin it right now. Let’s try something different.

Look in your bulletin and find the little sticky post-it note. How did we ever get along without these? You know the fellow who invented these is now a multi-millionaire. I make you no promise that this prayer experiment will make you that! Take that little piece of paper from the bulletin and cup it in your hands. Now, let’s sit quietly and breathe slowly. Ask God for whom you should pray. Take some time and give God time and space to speak...not simply for whom you should pray and for what you should pray, but for whom and for what **God wants you** to pray. Imagine that person, that situation now shrunk down to the size of that piece of paper. Hold them in your hands and pray for them. We will take some time just now to pray, and at the end I will say, “Amen.” OK? Well then let’s begin... Amen.

Well, how was that? Did God show you a person or a situation that God wanted you to lift up in prayer? Now take a pen or pencil, and jot on the paper the initials of the person for whom you were praying, or if it was a situation, maybe a little shorthand word about it. Then during the offertory (after you have placed your gift in the plate as it is passed, of course!) come forward as you feel so led and place your post-it note on the

prayer wall that our BRICK young adults group has made. Or you can wait until after the service and come by and put your note here on the prayer wall.

This wall will be before us throughout Lent. Post-it note pads will be here near it. Prayer resources will be here for you. Sit or kneel and pray in the chapel. Feel free at any time to add other persons or situations you feel led to pray for and place them on the prayer wall next week or the week after.

Lent is often thought of as a time of giving something up. That may be something like ice cream or TV. And that is fine, but here is what I want you most of all to give up. Give up trying to live life on your own and give over your life and the lives of those you care about to God in prayer. Lent means to lengthen, as the days begin to lengthen with the coming of spring. Lengthen your sense of God's presence and power to work in your life and in this Church's life. And see if the fish don't jump right in.

ⁱ Luke 6:40.

ⁱⁱ 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

ⁱⁱⁱ James 5:13-16.