

Riverside United Church

February 18, 2024

Scripture Lesson: 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, sons 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.

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

"Wandering Heart: #1 - Jesus Sought Me"

I know it is only February, but every once in awhile, I find myself thinking about and imagining being at our cottage in Nova Scotia along the shoreline of the Northumberland Strait. (Maybe because it is February!) Each year when we get to the cottage one of the things we do is to go and look at the shore line - the beach - to see how it has changed over the winter. Last year, we noticed great changes as Hurricane Fiona in Sept 2022 - had shifted a lot of rock and sand around.

I have known that shore since 1968 and each year it has been different than the year before - the amount of rock, that we have to climb over to get to the sand varies, the size and shape of the sandbars are different, the erosion of the bank varies. A number of years ago I read the book The Living Beach by Silver Donald Cameron and was fascinated by the blend of scientific information and poetic description of the beach, the shorelines of oceans and lakes. The beach is geographically a place of transition as the sand shifts and moves to give the shoreline some stability amidst the ebb and flow of water especially amidst the storms.

After reading and experiencing that transitional meaning of shorelines, I have enriched understanding of the stories of scripture that take place on shore of the Sea of Galilee. Each of those stories involves some sort of transition for the characters in the story.

Today we have heard the gospel of Luke's account of the calling of the first disciples and it happens on

the shore of the Sea of Galilee. This story focuses on Simon Peter and his response to the encounter with Jesus and fishing in the boat with an abundance of fish.

Today, we begin a Lenten series where we will focus on the stories that trace the development of Peter as a disciple. One of the first things to realize is that when we meet him he is called Simon, and later becomes Peter. So when we are talking about Simon or Peter we are talking about the same guy. The framework for this series has been developed by A Sanctified Art - which is a collective of ministers and artists that are offering their gifts to the church at large. The series for Lent is entitled Wandering Heart and the sub-title is Figuring out Faith with Peter. So, each week we will hearing one of the stories that tells us something about Peter, something about figuring out Faith with him. We will be jumping around the 4 gospels as we trace the path of discipleship. The gift of the character of Peter is that his path is not straight, but wanders around. We get the impression that Peter was an extrovert who did a lot of his thinking out loud, so we are able to know some of this wandering mind and heart.

The title Wandering Heart is inspired by the hymn that we sang at the beginning of the service - Come O Fount of Every Blessing. Each weekly theme will also be a phrase from the lyrics that Robert Robinson wrote in 1758. So, this week the theme is "Jesus sought me" - Jesus sought me when a stranger ... is the line that we sang.

In the gospel story, Peter is sought by Jesus, Peter is called by Jesus, Peter is invited to follow Jesus. As we read the story, it seems like such a quick, impulsive decision by Peter - to leave the nets - full of fish? - behind to follow. In Matthew and Mark, this story is placed at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. In Luke, Jesus has already been teaching and healing and as we heard a large crowd has gathered at the shore to see, to hear, to experience his teaching, his charisma. The verses that immediately precede this story speak of the evening before when Jesus was Simon Peter's house and his healing power was known as Simon Peter's mother-in-law was living with a high fever which broke. But, Jesus and Simon Peter were probably still strangers. I so wish that one of the gospel writers had offered us some more of Peter's back story before he appears on the scene. It might help to know why he made the decision to follow.

On Tuesday morning when we were discussing this story, a couple of the participants talked about the series The Chosen and the back story that they give Peter. While I haven't had a chance to watch that series on Netflix yet, I did read the commentary from the artist who created the painting that is on the bulletin cover today. The painting is entitled "River of Grace" and it is by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity. She picks up on Peter's initial response to the invitation when he says, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

I don't know if the artist had watched the The Chosen, or if they have a common source, but the information she offers was very similar to what was retold on Tuesday from The Chosen:

Peter was a commercial fisherman based in Galilee.

He was most likely bilingual, speaking Aramaic and Greek, culturally influenced by both Judaism and Hellenism. His business would have been under oppressive control of the Roman government, which arbitrarily imposed harsh rental and harbor fees, fishing licenses, and taxes on domestic fishermen. He was likely a blue-collar worker daily constrained by tides and taxes.

With this back story in mind, we may hear Peter's response to the abundant catch of fish with fresh ears. There are so many messages within his protest: "I'm not prepared. I'm not capable. I'm not deserving. I'm not faithful enough. I'm not smart enough. I'm not the type you're looking for."

And whether Jesus knew all that or not, Jesus sought Simon Peter, and invited him to follow. I wonder if Peter knew all that that choice would mean for his future, if he would have known all that it would mean, would he still have left the nets and followed? But, when can we know all the implications of a choice we make.

As we seek to find ourselves in the story, maybe we are bringing to mind those moments of transition in our lives, those places of transition - those times when we have made decisions that have affected the path of our lives. Maybe there have been moments or opportunities or invitations when the initial impulse of response has been - I am not capable, prepared, deserving, qualified, worthy to face such a challenge or undertake such a calling ... Maybe we have wondered what someone sees in us that we are being asked, being invited into a new venture. And yet, in the wandering and discerning, there have been moments of grace, of assurance, of strength found to enable the risk and courage of response and openness to possibility.

The moments of transition are not always the big decisions or transitions of our lives, but may also be the prompts that lead us to initiate conversation, to offer compassion, to move beyond fear or hurt, to imagine how a need can be met.

One of the truths of this story of Peter in transition was that he was able to experience the gift of abundance - not just the fish, but also the abundance of grace and worth offered in the invitation to see his life in a new way. Jesus seeks each of us with a sense of love and worth that is filled with grace and assurance. We may not feel qualified or prepared or worthy - and yet the invitation is not dependant on who we have been or what we've done - but is based on who we are and who we may become.

One of the contributors to A Sanctified Art is Rev. Sarah Speed, who offers a poem for each week of this Lenten series. For this week, she offers a poem, All This Time:

I put my headphones in.
 I walk quickly.
 I look toward the ground.
 I create one million barriers
 of independence,
 but still God seeks after me.
 God leans a rainbow over the sky.
 God sends sun after the rain.
 God blankets the earth with wildflowers.
 God allows music to carry
 and laughter to rise,
 all so that I might notice.
 And when I do notice,
 the unfurling that begins in my soul
 is slow and holy and burning.
 I am not alone.
 God has been chasing after me
 all this time.

All this time, God is inviting us into deeper connection and communion. So, at those lakeshore moments and experiences may we have the courage to respond to the invitation into the fullness of life. Amen.