

Recognizing Abundance

Meditation at Redlands United Church of Christ by Loring Fiske-Phillips
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Gospel Reading:
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.

Let us pray. Oh God, uphold Thou me, that I might uplift Thee. Amen.

If you've ever watched a famous person trying to get through a crowd to their waiting limousine, you probably have a sense of what Jesus was going through that day beside the lake. I'm picturing a group of burly guards wearing black t-shirts emblazoned with SECURITY on the back. Any maybe a little fish lapel pin on the front. Talking into their fists: "Move the crowd back on the left flank, JC has his back to the water. Let's get him into the boat." I wouldn't blame Jesus for feeling a little claustrophobic as the crowd started pressing in. He probably felt relieved as the boat started moving and the announcer said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, Jesus has left the shore."

We can imagine that the boat was a nice place for Jesus to speak to the crowd. It got him a little breathing room, voices carry nicely across water, and he began what must have been a captivating and charismatic sermon. And what exactly did he say to the gathered crowd? What words of wisdom did he impart? Luke doesn't even give us a hint! He simply says Jesus taught the crowds. So, we know right away that's not the important part of this story. Ah, but Luke does have a point!

The Gospel story quickly shifts to the personal interaction between Jesus and Simon. If this were a modern work of fiction, we might imagine that Luke described the whole crowd scene just as a literary device to get the two men out in the boat together to have a life-changing meeting. "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch" says Jesus. Now, we already know that the fishing crew was done for the day. When

Jesus arrived, they were already out of their boats and cleaning their nets. If I were writing the story, I'd have Simon answer with something like: "Look, Jesus, when I need help building a cabinet, I'll come see you for advice. You're an excellent carpenter. But as for fishing, I know." Instead, Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing." He completely leaves off the obvious "Aaaand, nighttime is the best time to fish, aaaand the fish aren't out there in the deep water, aaaand we just spent the last hour cleaning up." Nope, all he says is "If you say so, I will let down the nets." I'm assuming he didn't even say it with sarcasm: "Well if yooouuuuu say so, I will let down the nets." No, what he says is, "If you say so, I will let down the nets."

And you know what? It's a good thing he kept the sarcasm to himself. Next thing you know, he's calling over to James and John telling them he needs help bringing in the nets. They're so full of fish they're starting to tear, and even when they get all the fish onto the boats, they're still not home free. The fish are so heavy the boats start to sink!

Remember, fishing is more than a hobby for these men. It's their whole life. It's their livelihood. It's the main part of their diet. It's how they trade for everything else they need. When they go to synagogue on Sabbath, no one wants to sit in the same pew with them. It's all fish, all the time. Fish are what gives them life. So, filling the boats to overflowing is like getting a bonus instead of losing your job! They're imagining getting the new sails they've been needing, fixing that leaky roof, maybe a new fifty inch TV...

And yet, when they get back to shore, Simon Peter has already realized that he has experienced more than an abundance of fish; he's experienced an abundance of life. So, when Jesus says, "Come on, let's go fish for people," Peter, James and John leave their nets and their boats and their lives and even the fifty inch TV behind and follow Jesus.

I think one of the interesting lessons we can learn from this story is that abundance isn't some far off object that we need to chase after. It's made up of life itself. It comes from the same elements that we live with every day. When we trust ... when we don't assume that we know it all ... when we are willing to give up everything ... that's when we receive true abundance.

This is not a sermon where I tell you to give everything you own to the church and within a week you'll win the lottery and end up with ten times as much as you started with. But I am saying that those are not the kinds of things you should put your energy into chasing. The things in life that are worth pursuing are much closer at hand. Family, friendship, generosity, time, conversation, volunteerism, sympathy, listening, understanding, touch, music, poetry, reflection and the myriad emotions, experiences and relationships with people that make up our lives. Abundance comes from the common and Jesus' message was to get in touch with that richness that is right here and not try and chase after it.

When Jesus told the fishers to let down their nets, he didn't have any complicated advice for them. He didn't say, "What you really need to catch more fish is that new 72 foot, double hull boat with the 500 horsepower twin diesel engines." He didn't tell them "You need to get those extra strength nylon nets with the anti-tangle Teflon coating." Or, "You need to go over to Tiberias, that's where they're catching all the fish." No. He simply said, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." As it turns out, abundance was right there all along.

In the words of Forrest Church:
Want what you have,
Do what you can,
Be who you are.

One of the happiest people I've ever known was my father in law, Les Phillips. He was so at peace with who he was and he was wildly happy with exactly what God had given him. He told me that he never felt so rich as when he decided to tithe 10% of his income. He described it as a change of attitude more than a change of practice. Les was a factory worker who never made a lot of money, just enough so that added to his wife's income, their family could make it. They didn't own a house until they were each into their 50s. But, one time, he opened his wallet and showed me a \$100 bill. He said, "I keep this in my wallet all the time to remind me that I'm rich. That I have everything I need." I'm sure there were times when that bill was all he had in his wallet, but even then he still enjoyed life's wealth.

So if abundance is right here under our noses, why don't we see it? Why do we let down our nets and come up empty? I think one reason is we see what we expect to see. Years ago, I knew a woman at work with a very high, squeaky voice. Imagine Minnie Mouse ... and then take it up another octave. A friend asked me what I thought of her as a worker. I said I thought she was a little ... sorry, confession time here ... she was a little ditzy. And bless his soul, he responded kindly. He asked, "Why do you think that?" Well, you could have heard my prejudice crashing into reality from a mile away. And you know the worst part? She's an absolutely capable and wonderful person. I had not gotten to know her because of my own preconceptions and yet, she has become a blessing in my life. How many more people are right there under my nose and yet they remain who *I think* they are instead of who *God thinks* they are?

This table reminds us all that we are abundantly rich, that we have everything we need. And notice that it's not set with fancy foods and rich tapestries. It's the most common stuff in our lives ... bread and juice.

I grew up in both the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ. The Disciples have communion every Sunday and sometimes more often. I still remember the communion set that my dad, a Disciples minister, would take when he called on shut-ins. Communion was a sign of the abundance of the church's love. I also remember his rule about visits. Come in and sit down like you have all day, then leave after 15 minutes. No apologizing upon arriving that you couldn't stay long, no worrying at the end that the visit was drawing to a close. Instead, use every minute to experience the abundance of each other's company.

The message of Jesus was clear. The fish are right here, under your nose. Let down your nets. And now that we understand that message, the real gifts of God are right here too. People. People waiting for your presence, waiting for your love, waiting for you to show them God's abundance right under their noses.