

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

Deep-See vision

Isaiah 6: 1-8
Luke 5: 1-11

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“When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

Prayer: Please see us, O Lord, as we strive to see you. Open the eyes of our hearts. Amen.

For the past couple of Sundays the Bible passages have hearkened me back to my childhood days. I have my own fish story, a memory that came back to me of when I was ten years old in Illinois. A member of St. Paul’s UCC took my brothers and me fishing on a small pond. He outfitted us with what we needed, poles, lures, etc. He gave me a lure that was about two and half inches long, and it looked like a crayfish with hooks on it. He said it was his best lure ever and that I was to be very careful with it. Pressure! I had never casted out a fishing rod and reel before, so he gave me a quick lesson. The first two casts were tentative, a little short, but not too bad. He said, “Throw it out a little more, but avoid those low-hanging tree branches over there.” OK. So, I threw it out a little more, avoided the branches, and began to reel in. All of a sudden, my pole bent way down! I was so excited! But the line didn’t move. After a fair bit of tugging, it became clear that I had snagged his best lure on some underwater branch, and there was no letting go. I

wiggled and pulled. He said, “Walk to the left...” Nothing. “Try walking to the right.” Nothing. “Let me see it,” he said. He couldn’t wrest the lure free. With sadness and exasperation he said, “We are going to have to break it.” So, he started to pull straight back while winding it in at the same time. And, with a lot of pressure, the line gave way. But then, it moved! And, it moved like crazy! It shot to the left and shot to the right. “Fish on line!” he yelled and quickly gave the pole back to me. Do you know, I brought in a 14 inch, 3 pound crappie that was a quarter pound shy of the Illinois state record for crappie? That is no fish story. And, the lure was recovered!

I think about that experience in connection to today’s Bible reading, and I see metaphorical implications. How often is it that we can get snagged up in life, find ourselves totally exasperated, ready to give up? How often is it that in our honest moments when we are alone before God that we know of our imperfections, we know how we’ve gotten hooked, our sinfulness, and we wonder how God can still love us? Like Peter, like Isaiah, there is an awareness of being unclean, of being lost in the Holy One’s presence... and yet God sees us much more deeply than our sinfulness. God sees who we are, totally. God knows who we are in our thoughts. God understands who we are with our goodness, and our badness, with our strengths and our weaknesses.

With deep-see vision, God sees our full potential, and the stories of Isaiah and Peter confirm this. In spite of their frailties, God cancels out their imperfections and replaces in them a vision of what they can become. For Isaiah, he was a member of the royal family of Israel's monarchy related to King Ahaziah. God, however, saw in him the potential to be a prophet for God, one who would hear and speak God's words which often challenged the monarchy of Israel. As a result, some of the most beautiful words in all of scripture have come from Isaiah.

For Peter, he was a simple fisherman, making a modest living. Jesus sees in him the potential to be a disciple, and later an apostle, one who would fish for people. The abundance of the catch out in the deep water metaphorically reflects that new life for Peter and all the new folks who would believe in Christ.

A few years later, Saul is an assassin for the Jewish Pharisees, rooting out new Christians and executing them. But, with deep-see vision, God sees Saul's great potential as a missionary for Christ and transforms him, and the abundance of people coming to Christ because of Paul's ministry is phenomenal.

You see? In spite of our frailties, God has a vision as to how people can be useful to God! No matter who you are, God can use you. No matter what you do for a living, God has deep-see vision for you. No matter what your imperfections are, no matter what your sinfulness is, God needs you.

In our congregation, we have executives and secretaries, and we have executive secretaries. We have nurses, social workers, teachers, counselors, day-care workers, HR persons, realtors, accountants, payroll specialists, clerks at cash registers, writers, and computer technicians and programmers. We have retired people and we have people who are looking for work. Friends, God sees who you are. And, I believe, right where you are in your vocation is right where God can use you as a partner in God's plan, a participant in God's will and desire.

But, here's the thing... if God is going to use you, maxing out your potential, you must be willing to move with God. You must be willing to push out into deep water... to go to new places, to be sent out of comfort zones and into unfamiliar territory.

The contrast of shallow water verses deep water is very noticeable in this Jesus story for today. Jesus teaches the spiritually hungry crowd from the boat that is put out a little way from the shore. In shallow water. This is good. He teaches them the word of God while they are on the shore, and Jesus is in the boat floating in shallow water... where there is little danger. Hearing God's word when you're on solid ground is comfortable. It's secure. There's safety for the crowd when Jesus teaches from shallow waters.

We come here in our sanctuary to worship God, to be taught the word of God,

to enjoy the comfort of God's presence, and the blessings of our relationships with each other. It's solid ground. We come here to absorb the Good News of God's saving grace; we sing familiar hymns. We come to be nurtured in faith when we share in Holy Communion. This is all good. It's comfortable. We hear of God's love and grace. This is familiar. Here in church, there's safety in these shallow waters.

But, hold it! What's the point of being taught the word of God and worshipping God in the shallows if it is not to go out into the deep? What's the point of absorbing faith concepts for day to day living if it is not to go out and encounter those who need to encounter God? To go out to where we there will be an abundant catch?

There comes a time when we have to go out into the deep water, into the unfamiliar places, into the unknown, trusting that God has deep-see vision. God can see where God is sending us, but God hardly ever tells us ahead of time! God just wants us to go on faith and trust. Faith that God's vision is deeper than our vision. Trust that God's foolishness is wiser than our wisdom. God knows where God wants to send us, but sometimes we are hesitant. Sometimes, we protest like Peter did. We might not be very serious about doing God's will.

I enjoyed a cartoon strip called "Pontius Puddle" which features a creature

named after Pontius Pilate. Pontius, according to the cartoonist himself, says that Pontius shares our collective strengths and shortcomings. In this strip, the first frame has Pontius beginning with “I wonder if God can really hear me.” The next frame shows Pontius praying: “Hey, God! What should I do with my life?” The third frame has a voice from heaven saying: “FEED THE HUNGRY. RIGHT INJUSTICE. WORK FOR PEACE!” A surprised Pontius replies, “Just testing!” Last frame. “Same here,” God speaks back. (<http://pontius.ashowalter.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/002-just-testing0001.jpg>, retrieved February 6, 2010).

When we are taught the word of God in the safety and security of the shallow waters, are we really serious about going out into the deep and practicing it? Or, are we surprised at God’s answer, and we say, “Just testing, God.”

God likely wants us out in deep water; God likely wants us to trust in God’s deep-see vision, even in the face of our difficulties and frailties, our sinfulness, and feelings of insecurity regarding the unknown. And if today’s story is any indication, out there, out in the world, out in our lives, there is an abundant harvest. There is abundant new life. There is a huge yield of new life, more than enough to convince us that something really big is happening here. We become keenly aware that God wants to give us so much more possibilities of abundant life than we could ever ask for or imagine.

When we practice inclusivity out there and in here, when we practice God's love, when we walk by faith and not by sight, when we open our hearts to others who are pushed around or are hurting due to oppressive forces, God promises abundant new life. When we push into uncharted deep waters of extraordinary hospitality for all people, when we say, "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here," we will see an abundance of new life around here. When we confront issues of our time and discuss things we would really rather not discuss, when we stand up against pop culture and offer faith-building alternatives, we will find ourselves sharing in a huge catch.

Should we just call it a day and stay in here, in the safe, shallow waters, drying out nets as we should? Or, should we venture out into the deep, trusting in God's deep-see vision? Believing that our lives can be transformed into the full potential that God sees in us?

Let us respond to God's call to go out into the deep, saying "Here am I, Lord. Send me!"

Prayer:

Make us ready to say to you, O God, "Here am I. I offer myself to you. Send me. I trust in you to lead me and to be with me. May my faith grow in your deep-see vision, and may the consequences be what they may be." Amen.