FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Pick Up Your Oar”* Luke 5:1-11

Last Sunday, we heard the story about Jesus’ visit to his hometown. It did not go well. He told them the truth about themselves, and they were not pleased. He also told them the truth about God, and they became enraged. They threw him out of the synagogue and tried to throw him off a cliff! And all because he told them about a God who was much bigger than their partialities and preconceptions.

Here in this morning’s story—also from the Gospel of Luke—we hear another story of God whose love is much bigger than we know or expect to experience—so big that it almost sinks two boats, and frightens Simon.

As we heard, Jesus has been preaching in and around Galilee but returns to the lakefront where Simon and his friends live and fish. He has visited Simon’s home before—even cured Simon’s mother-in-law. Now, followed by crowds, Jesus asks Simon to let him use his fishing boat as a pulpit. And after he has finished teaching, Jesus tells Simon to “put out into deep water,” where, he tells him, he is to let down his nets again.

Now, Simon has been really good about things, so far. He has been very accommodating. And no wonder: Simon has seen some things. However, it has been a long night, and Simon is tired and probably more than a little discouraged because (as he tells Jesus) he and his friends have come back empty-handed after a long night of fishing.

Still wanting to be respectful, he does as Jesus asks and suddenly his nets, his boat, and the boat of his friend are filled with fish to the point that the nets are breaking, and both boats are in danger of sinking! It was the epitome of having “*too much* of a good thing.”

At least it seems that way because, instead of rejoicing, instead of being wildly delighted, Simon falls down before Jesus pleading, “Go away from me, Lord!”

He is terrified.

Simon has heard much of what Jesus has been teaching about God. He has heard Jesus tell about the mercy and love of God. What is more, Simon has seen Jesus heal people of all sorts of diseases. He has even seen him having power over demons, casting them out of peoples’ bodies and giving them new life with their family and community.

You would think he would be prepared for this wildly abundant gesture of goodness and plenty—this huge haul of fish…but…no.

Instead of being able to appreciate God’s goodness as channeled through Jesus, Simon can only see on his own limitations, his own unworthiness before the love of God. In short: Simon makes this miracle all about *him* instead of it being *all about God*.

I wonder how often that still happens. How often do we see the abundant goodness of God and think to ourselves: “oh, that is just ‘one off,’” or “that could never happen to me!”

United Methodist bishop, William Willimon tells the story of having been at a minister’s conference listening to another pastor, the Rev. Jim Wallis, you might remember as the leader of Souljourners up until last year when he retired from it. Wallis was giving a talk about the renewal of a lot of inner-city churches he had seen. Wallis told the group of pastors true stories of declining inner-city churches that had, by the grace of God, rediscovered their mission and begun to thrive.

Willimon had been a pastor and teacher for a very long time, yet he was still inspired and excited about the stories Wallis was sharing.

However, in the conversation among the pastors afterwards one pastor after another *criticized* Wallis’ speech. They accused him of looking at the church through rose-colored glasses. One even implied that he had lied.

That evening Willimon told Wallis that he was appalled by the group’s reaction. “I wasn’t,” Wallis said. “That’s the reaction I always get from mainline, liberal pastors. They are amazed when God wins. Scared to death that Easter might just, after all, be true.” (The implication is that those pastors not truly believe that the love of God is that real, that true, that powerful.)

Now, Bishop Willimon told that story back in 2004. Here we are some eighteen years later. And I know that the world has gotten even less comprehensible and even more frightening in the intervening years—but the doubt and reluctance that Willimon described is really nothing new. People in every age have found themselves tired and discouraged by “the way the world is going.”

We are like Simon—who, by the way, will be called Peter later in the story, the rock on which the whole church will be built—but as I was saying, we are like Simon. We have worked the whole night and we feel we have little to show for it but aching muscles and a strong desire to lay down and ignore everything else around us.

But Simon has heard and seen Jesus at work (and so have we), so Simon summons his strength and his hope, and he puts out into deeper water—which is to say: he goes out into unknown depths, dangerous territory because that is what deep water usually represents in the Bible: danger and death. Simon knows the dangers of deep water but he goes anyway.

Instead of danger and death, Simon receives a catch of fish whose abundance is so great that it is frightening. It is so great, he cannot deal with it and tries to push away the huge, massive, *gigantic* mountain of fish that God has provided.

As I observed earlier: Simon suddenly makes this all about him, himself, and he cannot deal with it. And what Simon thinks and what he is saying to God is: what can a man as small and as imperfect as himself offer to God *in exchange* for such huge a demonstration of love and goodness?

And of course, the answer is: he can’t. Simon is at least correct in knowing that he cannot *equal* God’s gesture toward him. *However,* Simon has already proven that God’s love is not displaced. What God has given Simon is exactly what Simon needed, and what Simon has given God has been exactly what is required of him…and of all of us.

Simon has given God his trust and his obedience. He has extended himself even though he must have been tired and disheartened, even though the world he knew and its reality did not support his trust, his faith or his hopes. He went out into deep water anyway.

I find myself wondering if Simon, perhaps, rolled his eyes as he picked-up his oar. Surely this was only going to be confirmation of what he already knew: *that there were no fish to be caught*.

…Well, the rest is history.

I do not blame Simon, or anyone else for hesitating. The world is always with us. Here in the 21st century, we live with a 24/7 news cycle that constantly tells us that *this* is our reality—and it is. It would be foolish to deny it.

However, it would also be foolish to allow the world and it’s ways to have the last word in our lives—that is reserved for God who offers us God’s good news which is that we also live with and in *God’s* reality, and God’s truth. It is that truth that filled the nets and both boats in Galilee two thousand years ago. God’s truth, God’s reality is what can also fill our lives even today. God’s truth is a love so powerful that it could not be defeated on a cross, nor held captive in a tomb, but came back to us and dwells with us still.

God’s reality was in that movement of muscle and spirit that caused Simon to pick up his oar one more time, and our good news is that it is in *our* muscles, *our* lives, and *our* spirits, too. And this can give us the strength to pick up a hammer and continue to build even when the world seems to be falling down around us. We can make one more meal or add one more canned good to the pile that will feed hungry people. God’s spirit can even fill our hearts and lungs with breath to speak God’s words of peace and healing in the face of hatred and violence.

We can do all of that because the story we have heard this morning, and whenever we open the Bible, or whenever we listen to the Spirit who is also always with us, is always telling us of a God whose love is real and is powerful. Like Simon, we need to pick up an oar and allow God to guide us into God’s love and abundance. Instead of being terrified, my prayer for us is that we will learn from Simon and rejoice and give thanks, and then turn and share this good news with everyone we know in every way that it is offered to us.

This is what I pray for, and I hope you will join me in that prayer, that hope, and most of all: in God’s reality of abundant love. May this be so. Amen.