

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts  
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on February 6, 2022 (Epiphany 5C)**

When I was in seminary, I had a wise professor who taught a lot of the parish leadership courses. He was a priest and he loved the church, but he used to roll his eyes whenever the church would function in ways where it simply couldn't get out of its own way. One of the cartoons he shared to illustrate this point showed two men in a row boat using oars on opposite sides. One man was rowing forward and the other was rowing backwards, causing the boat to go in endless circles. And as they were straining at their oars, the one yells to the other "Row harder!"

At times we all fall into this trap. Setting ourselves up in circumstances that need a big picture adjustment, rather than simply putting more effort into an untenable situation. Rowing harder, rather than rowing smarter.

And at first glance that's what seems to be happening in this call story from Luke's gospel. This seems like the ultimate "row harder" situation. These experienced fishermen had been out all night. They knew the waterways around their village better than anyone. Their families had fished in this spot for generations. They knew every nook and cranny, jetty and sandbar. And if the fish weren't biting, they simply weren't there. These veteran fishermen knew they'd find them the next day, or the day after that. But that sometimes you just need to head back to shore, wash your nets, and live to fish another day.

And just as they're finishing up with the nets, just when they're ready to take a load off and get some breakfast, Jesus shows up. He steps into Simon Peter's boat and asks him to put out a bit, so he can address the crowds that were pressing in on him. Which is a smart move; the ancient equivalent of a politician speaking from the back of a pickup truck. And when he's done, he tells this small group of fishermen to get back out there and catch some fish. Which must not have gone over so well. No fisherman wants to be fish-splained by a carpenter. And Jesus' request must have basically come across as "fish harder!" Why would you keep doing the same thing over and over again when it's clearly not working?

"Put your nets out into deep water and let your nets down for a catch." They'd literally been doing just that all night long. No one would have blamed Peter and James and John for walking away; for going home to take a nap. But there must have been something about this Jesus. Maybe he captured their imaginations when he addressed the crowd, maybe there was a certain look in his eye when he told them to go back out there. But for whatever reason, they consent to going back out into the deep water. They agree to "fish harder."

And by some miracle, they *do* catch fish. Lots and lots of fish. So many fish, their boats nearly sink. But, of course, as you may have noticed, this story really isn't about the fish. These suddenly successful fishermen aren't racing off to the market to make a big profit on their catch. In fact, we hear that when they returned to shore they dropped everything — which presumably includes all those fish — to follow Jesus. And Jesus even tells them they're done with fishing, that they're out of the fishing business; that from now on they'll be fishing for people. They'll be walking and working with Jesus to transform the lives of everyone they meet by sharing the good

news of God's abundant and abiding love for all people. This is not a fishing story, but a call story. And it all hinges on the fact that they listened to Jesus and agreed to take a chance to put out, once again, into that deep water.

Now, for Jesus' hearers and even for the most experienced fishermen, "the deep" was an ancient symbol of primordial chaos. We see this in the words of the psalms: "Out of the depths I call to you, O Lord" and "I have come into deep waters, and the torrent washes over me." And so Jesus isn't simply calling the disciples out to a good fishing hole. He's calling them to confront their deepest fears. He's calling them to put out into the deep water not to terrify them, but as a reminder that he will remain with them whatever chaos or uncertainty they encounter. The same one who would later calm the storm upon the sea and walk upon the water, forever changes humanity's relationship with the deep.

So, through his presence, the deep is suddenly transformed from a place of fear to one of hopeful abundance. Jesus can take the scariest places, the hardest places, the deepest places and turn them into places of profound encounter and relationship. Deep water becomes living water, chaos becomes comfort.

And seen through this lens, at this stage of the pandemic, after two years of chaos, we could all use some of that deep water, the deep water of relationship and renewal. Because emotionally and spiritually, many of the reserves we look to call upon are depleted. The signs of exhaustion are legion. No one is operating at their highest or best level right now. But Jesus beckons us out to the deep water, to move away from the familiarity and safety of the shallow places. Past what we know and into the promise of deeper relationship.

It's no easy thing to leave the familiar behind, even if we know it's time. Even if we know staying in place is unsustainable. When I was in my 20s, I worked on political campaigns for a living. Some of you know this. I worked in various places around the country for candidates on the federal, state, and local levels. I was good at it and I had a fair amount of my identity wrapped up in it. One of the hardest things I've ever done was making the conscious decision to get out of that business. I didn't know what would be next for me, but I also knew I couldn't remain in a field where people were treated as stepping stones rather than as children of God. Eventually this led me to seminary, but at first it merely led to uncertainty about what would be next. Like these fishermen, I dropped my nets, but had no idea where this would all lead, or what the deep water would bring.

Jesus' call to "Put out into the deep water" is an invitation, not a demand. You can stay in the shallow water. You don't *have* to follow Jesus. Those fishermen could have easily and understandably said, "Thanks, but no thanks. We're tired." But when you do consent to the invitation, there is peace, joy, and abundance even for the weary soul. Even in this moment when the thought of doing one more thing is exhausting. Even on those days when it feels like a major victory simply to come up with what's for dinner tonight.

We don't have to fish harder. We just need to listen to that voice of Jesus. The one who calls us in loving invitation. The one who leads us to deep and still waters. Jesus himself is that deep water. And when we heed the invitation, when we follow his call, we find ourselves in a place of

refreshment and nourishment and renewal. I know that more than ever, I could use some of that deep water right now. And I'm guessing you could use some as well.