

February 10, 2019 (Journey worship)

TEXT: [Luke 5:1-11](#)

TITLE: Too Much of a Good Thing

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

True story: There's a quiet Benedictine convent tucked away in the northern Dakota plains, where the nuns lead lives of piety and prayer. A man visited them one day and left them his nearly new Jeep. His papers were all in order. He had been driving across country when he'd seen the sign for the convent and decided right then to give his car to the nuns. As he walked away, he only asked that the sisters pray for him. Now the gift of the Jeep caused some consternation in the convent. Due to reduced numbers in their community, they had sold their previous building and now were housed in a former rectory. One younger sister wanted to keep the Jeep, knowing it would be helpful in navigating the poor roads around them (and a lot of fun to drive). The other sisters said it should be sold with the money used to support their ministry among the Native Americans. The Jeep was a great gift, but was it too much of a good thing for that community to handle? (Kathleen Norris, [Dakota](#)) More about this in a moment.

Let's now turn to today's gospel story. We know the old phrase of Jesus saying to the fisherman Peter, "Come, follow me and I'll make you a fisher of people." Thanks to Matthew and Mark's gospel, we imagine that dialogue happening as Jesus stands on shore and Peter is mending his nets nearby. In Luke's gospel, though, that call to Peter happened when Jesus was in the boat with him. Not only that, it happened after Jesus had used Peter's boat as a floating pulpit and then sent the fisherman out to deeper waters, where he soon had nets overflowing with fish and a spirit overwhelmed with being so close to God's Messiah. Peter falls to his knees and says, "Lord, go away from me for I am a sinful man." Peter's reaction didn't come from a bad thing, but rather from too much of a good thing. Let's think about the ways we get overwhelmed by too much of a good thing and risk missing out on what Christ is trying to tell us.

#1) This gospel story began with Jesus preaching near the Sea of Galilee. The crowds following him had grown so large that they backed Jesus up against the shoreline. Too much of a good thing. The sea prevented Jesus from stepping back any further, so he borrowed Peter's boat and made an amphitheater out of the curved shoreline, using the water to help with the acoustics needed to preach to a large crowd. The watery barrier became a blessing; the obstacle became an opportunity. If we consider where we are from the perspective of faith, too much of a good thing isn't automatically a problem; it may be a possibility.

#2) Luke described how the fishermen were washing their nets when Jesus came along. Fishing was usually done at night, so the fishermen Jesus met were tired and frustrated from having bad luck the night before out on the water. Peter knew a bit about Jesus already, so he was willing to lend this itinerant rabbi one of his boats, and despite his tired muscles, to row him out a ways from the shore.

But in that moment, Peter was less than enthusiastic. Having a chance to hear Jesus in person was great; but being his personal boat captain after a long night of bad fishing felt like too much of a good thing.

There's an important lesson in these details—namely, the reminder that God always comes to us in the midst of the mundane. Peter wasn't doing anything unusual when Jesus came to him, which tells us that Jesus comes to us in exactly the same way. Never limit God's presence and power to the time you spend within the walls of this church or spend seated in worship services. God is not a Sunday-sometime God, but an Everyday-all time God. In this story, Jesus was sitting next to Peter in Peter's fishing boat. That's the equivalent of Jesus being next to us as we're driving our car, typing in our work cubicle, standing in line at the grocery store, or yes, sitting in a chair in the Journey worship service. The only limitations as to where Christ can be are when we stubbornly convince ourselves that Christ has nothing to do with some aspect of our life. But by trusting that Jesus is near to us wherever we are—at work, at home, in doctor's offices or city buses—we awaken to what it means to have a vibrant, living faith.

#3) Now things get a little real in the story. Jesus finished talking to the crowd and tells Peter to row out into the deep water. Peter possibly thought— “I like staying close to shore. I like the shallow water right here. Deep water—that feels like too much of a good thing.” Rowing out into deeper water makes sense if you want to catch a lot of fish. But it is also a metaphor for something more. It is a reminder that Jesus doesn't want us splashing around in kiddie pools; he wants us out on the ocean. Jesus isn't here for Christian greeting cards and superficial Sunday sermons; Jesus is here for the deep stuff, the messy stuff, the risky, hard, “what it's all about” stuff.

Are we willing to go to the deep water stuff as a church? There are lots of sanctuaries you can visit on Sundays that are quite happy avoiding the deep water – ones with soft seats and soft-sell Christian-lite messages. Are we willing to row out further toward deep spiritual waters? Are we willing to talk about our life together even when that talk necessarily slops over into government and politics, “blackface” and racism, misogyny and #metoo, nuclear weapons and cyber-espionage? February is commonly celebrated as “Black History month”—can we talk about what that mean to us on a deep level? There are now more women than men running for President in 2020—what does that say to us on a deep level? The big issues we face like climate change and genetic manipulation of embryos are too much for any one nation to fix—so can we think about these things deeply on a global level? Can we do so as people of faith? I'm not sure. But I do know this: Our only hope is to follow Jesus—to go where the Lord sends us, casting our nets in the deep waters wherever Christ's outstretched hand points for us to go.

#4) When Peter did as Jesus told him and dropped his nets in the deep water, they filled up with so many fish that the nets almost tore—and even with a second boat alongside, he almost sank under the sheer weight of the catch. Definitely too much of a good thing! Peter could have copped an attitude at this moment and asked how come Jesus didn't

just cause the fish to jump into the boat instead of damaging his nets like this. Or better yet, he could have asked how come Jesus didn't just have the fish jump onto the shore where Peter was working, so he'd only have to pick them up, clean 'em and sell 'em? That may sound silly, but how many times has someone acted as if God should just send people into our church if God wants the church to grow? Why doesn't Jesus move in the lives of folks out there, so that they'll be happier and wealthier and ready to become a part of our cozy church family right here?

You and I both know Jesus doesn't work that way. Jesus didn't just get into Peter's boat by chance. He went to him and despite Peter's own doubts and rough hands and inexperience as a preacher, Jesus knew that he was to be the rock, the keeper of the keys, and a disciple of the gospel. So he helped Peter see what Peter couldn't see on his own. He called Peter to join in doing gospel work. God's work, that God won't do without us. So whatever brought you to worship this morning—whether for the hundredth time or only the second time—think of it as Jesus coming to you just as he came to Peter. Think of it as Jesus joining you in the mundane reality of your life, in the simple choices you make each day, and helping you see a depth, richness, and calling you may have never recognized for yourself but which Christ has seen all along. This world has a lot of things that need fixing—and a lot of people who are alone, afraid, hurting this day. Christ is already out there, but he wants us to join him—to be the hands, the voice, the heart of his good news for everyone to see.

I never finished telling you that story about the Benedictine nuns and the Jeep. Like I'd mentioned, the sisters had gone through a bad patch of late—the loss of some of their members, the loss of their old home as they'd had to downsize to a former rectory, and now tensions arose because of a stranger's unexpected gift of a Jeep. The person telling this story was a writer named Kathleen Norris, who was staying with the sisters for a while. And at one point, someone turned to her (as a visitor from the outside world, as it were) and asked her “Why did he give us the car? I don't understand.” To which Norris replied without hesitation. “I think it's because you people stand for something.” With those words, the Jeep became something bigger—not too much of a good thing, but rather a true gift that blessed both the giver and the recipients.

It's a great phrase: “You people stand for something.” May Christ say that about us—about the church—about this church—about the tired souls who gather here on Sunday mornings or through the week—about the people wherever they are even when the day or night before has not been productive or positive or inspiring at all. Like Peter, we may be tempted to push Jesus away, claiming to be unworthy, claiming to be sinful or unprepared or just plain tired of trying. But like Peter, may we too hear Jesus say to us: “Do not be afraid. From now on, you'll be catching, holding, restoring people. And we'll do it together.” That is our calling. That is something to stand for. So let us stand for that, that all the world might see the goodness of the Lord.

AMEN

