

When I lived in Ketchikan I used to go fishing now and then. I never had a boat of my own, but there was this place where these large rocks jugged out into the sea and once a year the pink salmon—we called them “humpies”—would run up close to those rocks. And often you could stand on those rocks and cast out and catch maybe a half dozen humpies in an evening. And many of my friends who were more into fishing and had big boats and expensive gear and such they’d laugh at those of us who fished for the humpies off the rocks. For them the pinks weren’t worth the fishing because they were the smallest of the salmon—the most common. They’d turn up their noses at the humpies and go after the silvers and the sockeyes and the kings... but you had to go out into the deep waters to get them.

I went out with them a few times and loved it—only got vaguely sea sick once. It was when I was with a friend on his gill netter and we’d gone out for an opening about a ten hour journey away from home. It had been a terrible weekend in terms of catching. Worthless really. Up day and night for two days in the rain and the wind, with nothing to show for it but waterlogged clothes and jellyfish stings on our arms. And on the way back to harbor I’d fallen asleep down below, only to wake up with my stomach churning. I went up to the wheelhouse where my friend was drinking coffee and trying to keep his eyes open, he took one look at me and said, “Take the wheel. I’m going below.” At first I was nervous—it was the middle of the night and the winds were really pushing us and the waves were breaking against us and we were still a long ways from home—but the second I took the wheel my stomach settled, and we made it home fine... with not a salmon to be found in the boat. And after cleaning up the gear and the decks I made it home and just passed out for about 18 hours.

And I was thinking about those things because as I was reading our gospel text it occurred to me that some things in our story happened on the shore, and some things happened in the shallows, and some things happened in the deep waters. Jesus spoke to people on the shore, and most of the people remained on the shore even as Jesus had Peter take him out in the shallows to teach them... but the real action of our story happened when Jesus told Peter to take the boat out in the deep water and let his nets back down.

Remember, in the Jewish scriptures, the deep waters are the place of chaos and turmoil. So here’s Peter, who’s had Jesus stay in his house, and had seen Jesus heal his mother-in-law, and had apparently been impressed with what he had to say... And when Jesus told him to push out into the shallows so Jesus could more easily talk to the crowd, even though Peter had been up fishing all night he said, “Okay.” And then when Jesus said to push out into deeper water, Peter went along with it. And when Jesus said to let down his nets—yes, the nets that he’d just finished cleaning on shore so he could store them away—he said, “Lord we’ve been at it all night and we—the professional fisherman in the boat—caught nothing... but if you say so...”

And he dropped those nets down, and there was a catch—a miraculous, net breaking, arm straining, call out the rest of the fleet kind of catch. And to Peter it was a sign that something beyond the natural had just happened. Peter had been a fisherman all his life. He’d been in the deep waters, he made good hauls and he’d come home empty-handed, but he’d never seen anything like this. This was something completely different; this was the impossible happening in his own little boat. And when he saw it he did what anyone in their right mind would do, he fell on his knees before this man with such incredible power and said: “Lord go away from me; for I am a sinful man.”

And I get that right down to the bottom of my soul. “Lord, what are you doing with the likes of me? I’m unworthy of your time, your notice... I’m certainly unworthy of the blessings of your miraculous acts. I’m a sinner and you; well to do the things you do you’d have to be God himself... or at least something very close...”

But Jesus said “don’t be afraid.” Don’t be afraid... that seems like such an odd thing to say, but I kind of think Jesus was seeing into Peter’s mind and recognizing that Peter must have been thinking, “If this man Jesus only knew who I really am—if Jesus knew the ways I’ve hurt people in the past, the ways I’ve let people down, the thoughts I’ve relished, the temptations I’ve given into then he’d certainly take back the gifts he’s given me and the grace he’s shown me. If he once saw through my hypocrisy he’d turn from me and shake the dust from his robes and strike me down with a curse...”

But that’s just not who Jesus is. Jesus sees Peter more clearly than Peter has ever seen himself, and Jesus calls Peter to his side, and Jesus loves Peter through and through.

Jesus loved him on the shore, and he loved him in the shallows, but it’s when he follows Jesus’ command to enter the deep waters that Peter begins to see what the love of Jesus looks like. Something happens when we take Jesus at his word and enter the deep waters at his command... yes, the risks go up; and no, there’s no promise that our nets will always be filled—at least in the ways we might be hoping—but despite that it’s in the deep waters that the possibilities exist. Jesus meets us in the safety of the beaches, and then calls us to enter the shallow waters with him, but he longs for us to be ready to put out into the deep waters. He longs for us to enter the places where people still live in chaos, where they live storm-tossed lives, that we might let down our nets—not to ensnare or manipulate or trap them—but to lift them and buoy them with the hope and peace and confidence that come from knowing that the God of all creation cares about them; the God of all power loves them deeply now in this life and forever.

That’s what we’re called to do... For too many years the church has tried to survive far inland and away from even the brink of the waters. The church has figured that if anyone wants to join us they can darn well grow legs and lungs and crawl out of the sea and walk across the dry land to enter our doors, that’s been our version of fishing. But the church was called to be a boat and not building... you’ve heard of “the nave” of a church—that’s the main body of the sanctuary—this area right here. Well the word nave means boat! And even if this is a boat built on dry land we’re called to live like we’re on the waters. We’re called to rub elbows with the folks still on the shore, and preach to them from the shallows, and to push off into the deep waters for their sakes to save them from the chaos of life.

That’s a scary thing. It’s relatively easy to cast out from the rocks for those that swim close to the shore... and every now and then we’re blessed to have new members come to us from another church who have recently moved into town. They come knowing the language and the traditions, and we can basically stand on the shore with a net in our hands and they’ll just jump into it and we rejoice to have them with us—and well we should. But what about those out there in the deep waters? What about those who have never stepped foot in a church, what about those who are wild at heart and who have experienced the wild parts of life and bear the scars of their wild past? What about those who think they’re too sinful, too willful, too far gone for God to care about—let alone the people of that stodgy congregation over there in the brick building with their trite ways and self-righteous traditions? How are we reaching out to them; who among us is willing to enter the waters with them, enter their chaos, and share with them the good news that Christ forgives us and rejoices in us even though we may be sinners still.

My prayer today is that we will recall that we are indeed sinners ourselves, but that Christ Jesus has graced us by calling us—in spite of that fact—and gifts us with joy and peace today and confidence for the future... And that with this knowledge we will follow Christ down to the shore, and off into the shallows, and even into the deep waters, for the sake of our brothers and sisters, and to the glory of our Lord. Amen.