

“Out of the Shallow End”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Luke 5:1-11
January 22, 2017
Third Sunday after Epiphany

After hearing about this lakeside encounter with fishing boats, I can't help but think of the movie I got to see on the day after Christmas. It was Disney's *Moana* - the tale of a Polynesian princess who tries to save her people without a love interest, without a man saving her, and without a talking animal sidekick [there is a rooster, but he's mostly there for physical comedy].

Moana will one day lead her people, and her father, Chief Tui, imparts as much wisdom as he can to her, including the fact that the island provides everything they could ever need. But when fish become scarce and the island itself seems to be dying, the ocean calls Moana to go out to deeper waters to bring life to her people. Her father is clear that going beyond the reef is strictly forbidden. Terrible things happen out in the deep. Of course, if the movie ended there, it would have been terribly depressing and wouldn't have fit this sermon at all! It's only a minor spoiler to tell you that Moana decides to go beyond the reef. She decides to go out to the deep waters.

Jesus has been preaching from the boat. Luke isn't all that interested in the sermon itself, so it was probably something similar to what he'd said in Nazareth — full of language about good news to the poor and the oppressed. Like most people with most sermons, I bet Peter nodded through it, and was extremely happy when it ended.

Peter and company had, after all, been up all night fishing, and for nothing. They'd washed their nets and were ready to go home and get some rest. Not only were they tired, but it had been a crummy night for fishing. No fish meant no business. Empty-handed and exhausted, it was time to return to land. And then Jesus tells Peter “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

Peter responds with the news that they've caught nothing and, by the way, they've been out all night. But Jesus has told him to do something, and so he utters the most pious, most fervent expression of faith found in the Bible: “if you say so.” And he goes out from the shallows, into the deep water, and lets down his nets.

In a few minutes, we'll be ordaining two new elders, one new deacon, and installing three other officers who've been previously ordained. In our Presbyterian tradition, we take seriously the belief that God calls all of us to do ministry in our lives, and that the call to serve in the formal offices of ruling elder and deacon is of equal importance as the call to be a preacher. So we say special prayers and call it all “ordination” and it confuses the heck out of the Methodists and Episcopalians when we have breakfast together. Our ordained officers take vows in the form of questions. One of the questions I'll ask all of them will be this: “Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?”

Now can you imagine if all six officers being installed this morning looked at me and said, in one voice, “If you say so?” They’d be fallin’ out in the choir and the whole back row would be holy rollin’ in laughter and I’m pretty sure our Pastor Emeritus would dive headfirst through one of these stained glass windows!

There’s a question they ask Presbyterian ministers when we get ordained. All week, it’s been running through my brain as I think about ordination and installation and inauguration. I do wonder what our elected official would say if asked: “Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?”

“If you say so.” But that’s where Peter was. His boat was empty and his pockets were empty and his energy tank was empty and his patience for rabbis who want to go fishing was waning. And his spirit was empty. I imagine Peter muttered through the night as it became clear there’d be no fish bounty.

Who among us hasn’t felt empty like that? You work your tail off at the office, at home, at the church, in the world, and your net comes up empty. You want to curl up in a ball and dream of a world where you can just sit on the beach with your toes in the water and a bucket at your side and the fish just jump right into the bucket when you holler “Heeeere fishy fishy fishy!” The world seems unfair and overwhelming and bent on making itself miserable. And in that moment, Jesus shows up and says, “Let’s go out to the deep water.” And we have no desire to do what Jesus tells us to do, because it’s hard. The temperature is perfect in the shallow end - we don’t want to go out there! The deep water for us might be to reengage a world gone mad, or to reengage a relationship gone sour, or to get outside our comfort zone in loving our neighbor. Whatever it is for us, going out into the deep is the last place we want to go at the moment.

Jesus says to go to the deeper water, not to be a pain and cause us hardship, but because that’s where the fish are. He’s not trying to overwhelm Peter, but to overwhelm Peter’s emptiness with abundance. Peter doesn’t get moving with energy and imagination and love, but he does say “if you say so” and, it turns out, that’s enough. The abundance he finds is a different kind of overwhelming. Peter can’t handle it for a moment - he’s a sinner and this is too much. But Jesus calms him. And then Jesus calls him, and the others, to a new task.

It’s scary to go beyond the reef, into the deep waters, when there be pirates and sharks and dragons. Or worse, what if there’s nothing new out there? A glance around shows us a world where people are hungry when there’s enough food and people are sick when there’s enough medical care and the planet itself is sick while half our leaders deny there’s a problem and that’s just page one. It’s enough to want to turn your back to the sea and head for a cave and hide. *I’ll just sit here in this cave and pray to my God and all will be well and I’ll never have to deal with people or pestilence or politics or problems again. I’m a landlubber now — done fishin’.*

Except that that’s not who we are made to be. We are made to explore and to relate and to argue and to be challenged. It’s what separates humanity from chinchillas and ostriches and fruit flies. Our God wants you to be loved and to be happy, but the scriptures never say that God wants your life to be easy. We are made to be in community and we’ve got these complex brains to engineer miracles of science. We are made to create and to discover. We are made to work - and to glorify God in our work. I see folks here who glorify God as teachers and medical professionals and musicians and lawyers and engineers and

government workers and homemakers and artists and scientists and in law enforcement and construction and writing and business and as students. Deep in our God-given souls, we want to be nudged toward something beyond ourselves. And in Jesus we find our Lord saying “Go deeper. What you will find there will overwhelm you. And then I will show you how to change the world with *your* very hands and *your* very feet and *your* very ears and eyes and hearts.”

Before Moana decides to go out on her adventure beyond the reef, her kooky-but-wise grandmother nudges her to embrace her call to go to the deep. Moana wants more than just nudges in the form of mystical talk so she says to her grandmother, “If there's something you want to tell me, just tell me. Is there something you want to tell me?”

And her grandmother replies, “Is there something you want to hear?”

We yearn for the invitation from Christ. The invitation to go to the deep and find ourselves overwhelmed by a God who offers us abundance that throws us to our knees. And the invitation to then take our fears and turn them into something holy. And there is Jesus, at the lakeshore, smiling and saying:

“My child. You have been catching fish all your life. Follow me. Follow me, and I will show you how to set people free.” Amen.