

s-Epiph5C-10-In the Boat Together
2 Cor. 6:1-10 *We work together with him*
Luke 5:1-11 *The miraculous catch*
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IN THE BOAT TOGETHER

Our Bible lesson today, about the miraculous catch of fish, might bring to mind a number of Christian symbols. The fish is a familiar one—you see it on the back of cars and on jewelry and so forth. The sign of the fish is a double entendre because the word “fish” in Greek—*ixthos*—is both an acronym for “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior” and also a reminder of the many stories where Jesus did something with fish. Either he ate fish or served fish to a multitude or, as in today’s passage, brought forth a miraculous net-full of fish. Fish was a staple of life in Galilee, so you might say the Bible is a very fishy book!

Other watery symbols include the anchor of faith, which holds us safe in the storm, and the lighthouse, which calls us to God, and the boat, which represents our journey of faith.

But the miraculous catch of fish is not a symbolic story. It’s not a parable. We don’t have to try to tease out the meaning of either of today’s readings, because both Luke and Paul are straightforward, for a change. Both of these passages clearly have to do with God calling us to service, and how we respond to that summons.

About a month ago, we held our Annual Congregational Meeting after worship. Our meetings are usually very short, fifteen minutes to a half hour, perhaps. Did you know that the Annual Meetings at other churches may drag on for hours and hours? By and large, we’re a pretty harmonious group, and rarely have real conflict. That’s a good thing, of course. Still, I wonder why this is. Are we really such superior Christians that God lets us breeze through the years without any arguments? Do we always steer our little boat safely away from storms... and is that always the best thing we could be doing?

Our Annual Meeting this year was about as short as it is possible to be and touch all the bases. It was short enough that it made me kind of uncomfortable. In the Congregational way of organizing and governing a church, there isn’t much more important than the Annual Meeting, when members get to exercise their democratic right to vote. We vote for our leaders. We vote to accept the Treasurer’s report.. And then there’s the budget.

It’s been a long time since anyone’s had a concern or question about the budget. This is a magnificent declaration of confidence in our budget committees, but I’m not sure that’s healthy or wise.

I hope you all weren’t so lulled by the success of previous budgets that you didn’t notice when Jim explained that our budget for this year is almost sixteen thousand dollars in the red. Are you startled and upset to find this out today?

OK, I’m not really here to scold but to throw out a little call for realistic thinking and planning. That’s what Paul was getting at in his speech to the Corinthians.

Paul knew, and I know, that there’s no reason to panic. All churches get a wake-up call from time to time. Every church pastor I know is telling the same tale. All of our churches are coming up short this year. They have members out of work, members whose investments are

doing badly; people have moved away or become so depressed they don't want to participate any more.

Paul reminds us that this is a common phenomenon. All congregations suffer at some point. He mentions afflictions, calamities, labors and sleepless nights. That sounds familiar, doesn't it? If Paul were writing to the modern-day church, he might include budget crises, loss of members, ageing congregations, a need for sharper mission focus. Can things get worse? Sure they can. But they also can get better.

Paul also points out the many, many blessings churches have enjoyed and utilized to stay strong and healthy: purity of purpose, the quest for knowledge, the application of patience, the hospitality of genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God which is the foundation of any church.

Paul wants the Corinthians to take a look at who they are and what they are currently doing. He wants them to think hard and long about their priorities as a congregation. What is most important to them? Worship? Service? Hospitality? Generous giving? Education? These are all important ministries, but a small church can't put them all at the top of the list.

Biblical commentator Jeffrey Jones, has some good advice. He says, simply, "Going back to the basics is essential—especially in times of uncertainty and conflict." Going back to the basics—doesn't that sound good? Going back to the basics isn't retreating, it's progressing. All I've heard and read about the emerging Church, a new and exciting Christianity that's beginning to make itself known in the world, shows this movement to really be another back-to-basics reformation. Young people want church to be experiential, not formal. They aren't hung up on buildings, membership rolls, sermons and specific kinds of prayers. They aren't even locked into worshipping on Sunday mornings at 10 o'clock.

The new Christians are allowing themselves to set priorities. It's a healthy development in the life of the church. But going back to the basics is as essential for the existing church as it is for the emerging church. "Behold, I make all things new," Jesus said. All things, even little traditional progressive congregations who are struggling to be relevant and healthy.

Going back to basics sounds great, but how can we make it work for us and for our own special way of being church?

Paul's got an answer. He reminds us to focus first on *what we believe*. When we know that, we can identify the common ground upon which we stand as a family of faith. The important thing, Paul says, is to emphasize the things we share, not on our differences.

As a UCC congregation, we're very comfortable with a variety of beliefs and expressions within our group. But perhaps in celebrating diversity we've lost some sense of what really connects us and binds us together. We need to find out what that is.

After all, what we believe really does shape the way we act. And Paul suggests that when we get this part of church right, the other pieces of church will fall into place. Church renewal today, whether it is rebuilding an existing congregation or creating a new one, is all about the importance of determining common core values and bedrock beliefs, and *then clearly and constantly expressing them*.

We've all heard it before: people don't seek out a church because they're dying to serve on a committee. They come because they are looking for something more, and hope that this is where they will find it. They need meaning, comfort, challenge, and knowledge. They come

because they're wounded, or grateful, or seeking like-minded friends. They come because they want to be in God's presence in the midst of community. And this is how it should be.

Jeffrey Jones even suggests that when a group of faithful people are able to determine what it is they believe and how they want their beliefs to shape their lives, then it's possible to turn people loose to do ministry. Can you imagine church without all the traditional committees and systems that tend to deaden enthusiasm, stifle effectiveness, and squash vibrant mission? Is this even possible? Maybe, but it might take a miracle.

Now, back to the fish.

This is Luke's version of Jesus calling disciples. Jesus is pressed up against the shore by a crowd of people who want to hear him preach. You might say that he has *pressing* responsibilities, and is seeking a solution. He turns and sees a couple of boats. So he asks the fishermen a small favor: would one of them take him out in a boat so he can preach without being pushed into the lake? It's a small favor to ask.

When the sermon's over, he wants to return the favor. Jesus mysteriously suggests that they take their boats out one more time and try again. Now, this goes against all of Peter's experience as an expert fisherman. There's really no point in trying again. What is it he says?

"Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet, if you say so, I will let down the nets." Doesn't he sound discouraged? Doesn't he sound doubtful?

OK, so Simon Peter and his crew push out into the water, probably shaking their heads and rolling their eyes. But pretty soon, they are calling out in amazement for their fishing partners to come out, too, and give them a hand. There are too many fish! It's too much work, too much abundance, too miraculous an experience for them to handle all alone. Wouldn't we like to have his problem?

Like Peter, our response might be to shy away from all that abundance. It might look, at first, like too much of a challenge for a little church to take on. But Peter and the prophets all had this response to being called by God—feeling inadequate.

But again and again, the Bible shows us that God doesn't call the most qualified people to do God's work in the world. Talk about one of your mysteries of faith—God's call is unpredictable and unmerited. If we all waited to be perfect before we could be disciples, Jesus wouldn't have very many!

When God asks us to step up and join the project, we should give it our best try. Building the kingdom is like building a house for Habitat for Humanity. There are all these marginally experienced people who have very little but some energy, time, and enthusiasm. You don't just let them pick up any old tool and have at it. You can't build a house with things being done at random. Can you imagine? It would be like the Winchester Mystery House—stairs going nowhere and windows opening into walls. Fortunately, God's got a plan!

Building God's kingdom is a project like any other project. I know that we, as a congregation, truly want to be part of building the kingdom. We want to answer God's call; we want to be joyful and effective. Is there an up-to-date plan for Fremont United Church of Christ? Do we need to take a look at what we think is important, and reorder our commitments? It's simply a matter of identifying our priorities, and letting what we believe determine what we do.

As Howard Gregory puts it:

God's invitation to put out into the deep for a catch is a sharp contrast to our human penchant for the predictable and the routine. It's an invitation to venture out onto new ground or into new depths. It also points us toward new challenges in mission and ministry. The most profound and significant experiences of God are not found in the safe ways and places.

So, don't panic. Let's go back to the basics, and budgets and membership rolls will take care of themselves. Let's experience God, and put out into the deep, because miracles are possible! Amen.

PRAYER:

Gracious God, what can we give up to achieve what you call us to do? Like Peter, could we drop it all and follow Jesus in a new direction?

It's something only you can help us discover. We need new priorities and goals that are according to your will for us. We want to be doing all that we can to build your kingdom. We need your wisdom, O Lord, so that we can discern your plan for us as a church. We are waiting with our nets out, expecting something miraculous to call us to Jesus. Amen.

RESOURCES:

The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary (Abingdon Press), volume IX, pp. 114-118.

The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV (Oxford University Press, 2007)

Feasting on the Word (Westminster John Knox Press), Year C, Volume 1, pp. 327-331, 334-337

Sacra Pagina (The Liturgical Press), volume 3, pp. 87-91