



Looking to Luke and His Jesus at the Water's Edge

*Is that the wind,
or did I hear the
whisper of a
voice in my
heart: "Do not
be afraid"?*

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“Put out a little from the shore,” he said to the six men as they climbed aboard the boat on the edge of the sea. Two were brothers, and another too. One worked the money post. All were disciples of this man Jesus.

Sitting on the bow he watched them untie the lines, push the boat out, scramble to put up the sails to catch the puffs of air that would blow them from the crowds on the shore into the solitude of the ever-mysterious, deepening waters of the sea. He watched more than simply the movement of their arching backs and the stretching of muscled arms and weather-worn hands. He watched the movement of their hearts.

Jesus watched the boat and the men move further from the shore and the noise of the crowd. He watched the conversation quieting down and the solitude of the sea lolling the six men back and forth in the hypnotizing roll of the waves. All the time he is watching the movement of their hearts below.

Jesus knows each of them by name – Martin, Joseph, Michael, Gordon, Stephen, and Pierre, like other disciples before them – Peter, Andrew, Philip, James, John, and Bartholomew. Whether it be the Lake of Gennesaret in the spring of 33, or the shoals of Nantucket Sound in the summer of 2003, the Master waits and watches both the lives and hearts, both the outer and inner movements, of those who are his disciples.

When, I wonder, will the moment come when their eyes meet his, and in the whisper of the heart each will hear in his own particular and personal moment of solitude, “Put out into deep water and lower the nets for a catch”? I too sit on the bow of the boat and watch with Jesus these friends of mine on this Sunday morning on Cape Cod in Massachusetts.

Two of the six disciples have left behind – for the little while – the care of a disabled son and daughter.

Brian is just turning nine in chronological years, but is endlessly turning numbers and days and objects and ideas in the obsessive cycle of the autistic child’s mind. His father is turning his head now into the wind and surveying the contours of the growing distant shore. Perhaps he is also, and always, surveying the stretch of a distant future for his son, and the resources he needs to provide after he and wife have gone.

Jesus is watching this man closely and parting his lips – and somewhere deep in his being the disciple turns, slightly disturbed by something he knows not what – “Is that the wind, or did I hear the whisper of a voice in my heart: ‘Do not be afraid’?”

Another one of the disciples has a daughter, Michaela, who also is close to nine years old, far beyond the expectant age of survival from a rare congenital disease that robs the innocent young of this earthly life. The disciple and his wife back on the shore already have walked through the agony in the garden as they handed back young Michaela’s older brother Kevin, who suffered the same disease, into the arms of a God they hold in trust with expectant hearts of faith.

And this disciple now jumps up, takes off his shirt, and to the taunts and tease of playful laughter dives into the deep water, surfacing with a hold on the rope as the boat carries him through the cleansing and refreshing waters of this immense sea. Perhaps he is also, and always, holding on to a faith, to a Church, that will pull him through a time of handing back a part of his heart with a daughter he loves so well.

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Another of the disciples has lost his job again. A bright and successful businessman living through the rise of technology sales in the eighties and nineties, he is now living through the decline of a weakening economy that has dealt a devastating blow to his sector of the market. With eight or nine jobs in nearly as many years in a once fast-moving and exciting market, he gathers up his depleted energies for the next job that he is to start a week from now.

This disciple is the captain of the boat. He is steering the vessel, adjusting, the sails, marking the course with a sure footing borne of time and experience. Perhaps he is also, and always, steering, adjusting, and marking out the unpredictable forces of a wild and changing nature – in this instance the workplace – with a sure footing of a faith borne of time and experience.

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Luke 5 is a story of discipleship. It is a story of Jesus watching and waiting until the time is right, deepening the relationship. It is a story of outer and inner movements of the disciple to his or her beloved.

Luke 5 is a story of getting away from what is crowding our lives. It is an invitation from Jesus to “put out a short distance.” It is an invitation from Jesus to move from the noisy community of our lives to the pin-drop solitude of our hearts. The crowds are still there – there is no escaping them for more than a little while – for Jesus himself still teaches them, but he – and now we – have moved out a little distance.

Luke 5 is a story that will push us to go out further and deeper from what is crowding our lives – and lowering the nets for a catch. The invitation to Peter to go even further and deeper in faith is an invitation to us to likewise go even further and deeper in faith, trusting Jesus that we will get a payout, even though we have “worked hard all night long and have caught nothing.”

We – and the people to whom we minister – get caught in the crowd of our routine, our predictability, and our patterns that all dig out the familiar roads we travel.

But Jesus invites us to leave that routine – for a little while – and jump into the boat, push off a little, then when we have gone that far, go just a little deeper, and then take one just one more step into that trust and belief that yes, no matter what has happened, no matter how long the night, that truly there is a catch for us.

The sea for Jesus is the place of the unknown becoming known, the unseen coming into sight, the lacking of faith in the heart being filled with faith, even to the breaking point.

Miracles happen on the sea. Jesus walks on water. Jesus waves a pall of stillness where there was just a storm. Jesus approaches the disciples in apparitions like a ghost. Jesus disappears and reappears. On the sea the words, “be not afraid,” are carried on the wind.

When a disciple goes away for a while, he or she discovers that the socially isolated autistic child one day will walk into a circle of a family and reach out smiling to hold hands with the others. He or she experiences not only the burden of a daily cycle of incredulous demands, but also a laughing, happy child who is affecting change in the lives of siblings and cousins and neighbors, even in his own slow but miraculous healing, and rippling God’s love to a universe of relationships unseen and unknown in a distant beyond.

When a disciple goes away for a while, he or she sees not only the fragile and weakened muscles in the body of a physically dependent child, but also the mightiest force of soul in the luminescent smile of a little girl who is brighter than the noon day sun. And time, even when it is caught as a thief in the night, can never eclipse nor take away that experience of joy.

When the disciple goes away for a little while, he or she disembarks with a lighter load knowing that the market’s force, no matter how seemingly powerful, is not the determinant of the man and his ability to work. He can earn daily bread, and more importantly, daily hope.

And when we are at our breaking point, so heavy with gratitude at such an awesome catch, our hearts and our bodies fold over bursting with gratitude that all we can mutter is “leave me, Lord, for I am a sinful person.”

In pastoral care ministry, we so often meet persons at their breaking point and at that moment – a voice is heard in the wind, “be not afraid,” a voice of truth, or of reconciliation, or of acceptance, or of understanding, or of peace. The disciple folds over, and we with her or him, standing or kneeling in utter amazement at the “catch.” ▼

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