

Sermon for Epiphany V Year C 2019  
*Absolutely Necessary to Leave . . .*

Any fans of the film “You’ve Got Mail”?

It’s one of my favorite films and I have watched it so many times that not only are the lines of the film committed to my memory, they serve as a kind of running commentary on a variety of situations in my life and ministry as well as an occasional commentary on scripture.

The gospel for today is one of those scriptures that brings a particular quote from *You’ve Got Mail* to mind.

Perhaps if you know the film you’ll recall when Joe Fox (portrayed by Tom Hanks) is on his way to a meet Kathleen Kelly (portrayed by Meg Ryan) for the first time . . . in the flesh.

Joe and Kathleen have been corresponding online via emails for quite a few months but they have never met face to face.

The scene I’m thinking of is where

Joe is walking with his administrative assistant, Kevin, (played by Dave Chappell).

Joe is expressing his anxieties, fears and deepest hopes about meeting Kathleen whom he has kind of fallen in love with, though he has never met or seen her.

Kevin is trying to reassure his boss and offers him the following interesting piece of advice:

*I always take relationships to the next level.*

*If that works out, I take it to the next level after that, until I finally reach that level when it becomes absolutely necessary for me to leave.*

Sometimes I think that’s exactly how many people feel about God and the church.

We're only willing to go so far.  
We test the waters, dip our toes in a bit,  
but inevitably we reach that level  
when making a deeper commitment  
means it is absolutely necessary for us to leave.  
While that is exactly what Kevin is talking about,  
what, if, we turn what he says around.  
What if we take things to the next level . . .  
as the prophet Isaiah,  
the apostle Paul and Simon and the disciples did—  
they took things to the next level  
and soon it become absolutely necessary for them to leave . . .  
to leave everything else that came before behind them.  
As Luke tells us . . . they left everything and followed him.

When was the last time you knew you had reached a point where it  
became absolutely necessary to leave to what came before behind you?  
That it became absolutely necessary for you to follow in a new path?  
When you had to leave the same old, same old behind?

For Simon, it had been a long night.  
He has done everything a good fisherman is supposed to do,  
just like he had been taught.  
He has been doing it like this for years;  
night after night,  
week after week,  
season after season.  
But then there comes a night when the usual routine does not work.  
The net is empty.  
Simon and his partners have caught nothing.  
Not a single fish.

Now I am not a fisherman,  
but I remember times like that . . .  
And I have a feeling you do too.  
Times when we have done everything “right,”  
gave it our best, did all we could,  
said our prayers, lived faithfully,  
worked hard.  
We did all this . . . kept going to the next level . . .  
And yet our nets still came up empty  
and we were left entangled in disappointment,  
doubt, sadness, grief, anger, fear and confusion.  
We all know the disappointment and pain of empty nets.  
We may feel our nets are empty for a variety of reasons  
usually due to changes in life circumstances—  
jobs, retirement, death of a spouse or loved one,  
illness, children grown and moved away,  
changes of circumstances of all kinds can make us feel  
as if our nets are empty.  
We can feel as if we’ve gotten to the next level  
and it’s not we who have left everything behind,  
but life itself has left us behind.

But empty nets are not, however, the final reality for us.

Jesus tells us the antidote for empty nets is deep water –  
(in other words . . . keep going to the next level!)  
“Put out into the deep water  
and let down your nets for a catch,” Jesus says.  
But frustration, fatigue, despair, and fear sometimes  
make it difficult to leave the shore.  
Sometimes it seems there is nothing to do  
but sit on the shore and wash our empty nets;  
nets that serve only to remind us of what we did not catch,  
symbols of the what got away and what we have lost.

Simon protests, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.

Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.”

Simon’s initial protest turns to resignation.

It is the resignation of one who has nowhere else to go, nothing else to do, nothing left to lose.

Though Luke writes about a lake, boats, nets, and fisherman, this story (as we all know) is about more than fishing.

It is a story of life and transformation,

Simon’s transformation and ours.

Jesus is calling Simon to a new life, a new way of being.

This happens in the context of fishing

because that is what Simon knows best.

Jesus comes to us in the ordinary everyday circumstances of our lives.

Whether we are fisherman or land lubbers

he bids us to put out into the deep water . . .

to go to the next level . . .

and let down our nets again for a catch.

But there is something about depth that is frightening.

Going into deeper water is risky.

You cannot touch the bottom.

You are in over your head.

You cannot see the bottom or what might be down there.

People drown in deep water.

And that . . . is the point!

The deep is the place where we both drown and swim.

It is the place where we are buried with Christ

and raised with Christ.

It is where we experience the fullness of our baptism,

the height, the depth, the width and the breadth of Christ’s life

and his love for us and for the world.

At that level we might say, it’s absolutely necessary for me to leave.

Often many of us are content to stay in shallow water.

It is safe, comfortable, and familiar.  
If it gets too scary we just step out.  
But shallow water is the place of empty nets.  
The deep is where we need to go.  
It is what we need . . . and what the world needs.  
Because the world does not need smarter people,  
harder working people, or more beautiful people.  
The world needs *deep* people.

People of depth who are willing to be transformed;  
willing to go to the deep end,  
to get in over their head,  
to reach where they cannot see,  
to stand where they cannot touch bottom,  
to trust beyond their understanding and fear.  
That is the place to which we are invited this day.  
To go to the next level and the next and the next . . .  
until it is absolutely necessary for us to leave everything  
that came before behind and follow Jesus.  
To leave everything and respond, "Here am I, send me!"

Every day that we put out into deep water  
becomes a new day . . . a day of creation.  
For just as in the beginning  
"the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters"  
so today the Son of God and Simon  
are moving upon the face of the water.  
A new creation is about to take place.  
Jesus will take Simon deep water fishing.  
He will recreate Simon and his life.  
He will teach Simon a new way of fishing  
and show him a new place to catch fish.  
Jesus will give Simon a new use for his empty nets.

The empty nets of Simon's life will be lowered  
into the depths of both human life and God's life;

Simon Peter will draw divine abundance,  
abundance that will stretch his life to the limits.  
He is not, however, simply bringing up a great many fish.  
Simon Peter nets will be filled with the gifts of God—  
love, compassion, wisdom, mercy, forgiveness,  
peace, hope, healing, joy, a vision for the future,  
and the boldness of faith to keep going to the next level.

The deep is always the place of sacred transformation,  
the level where there is new life and abundance beyond quantity.

But there is something else we need to know  
about the next level, the deep places.  
When Jesus took Simon deep water fishing he did not say,  
“Let down your next and see *if* there’s anything here.”  
He said, “Put out into deep water and let down your nets *for* a catch.”  
You see, in the deep water the catch is always guaranteed.

The hardest thing to do at these moments,  
when it’s time to take things to the next level  
is to make the leap of trust that Simon makes.  
“Yet if say so, I will.”  
Yet if you say so, Lord, I will try again.  
Yet if you say so, Lord, I will be faithful to my call to follow you.  
Yet if you say so, Lord, I will go deep  
rather than remain in the shallow waters.  
Yet if you say so, I will trust that your presence in the boat  
is more precious than any guarantee of success.  
Yet if you say so, I will cast my empty net into the water,  
and look with hope for your kingdom to come.  
I will leave everything behind, the same old, same old  
and go to the next level and follow you.

Dear friends in Christ, may it be so.