

THE GEOGRAPHY OF GOSPEL: The Sea of Gennesaret

Luke 5:1-11

The study of geography has somewhat receded into the background of education, perhaps signaling that we have indeed become so powerful and creative that we can and do overcome much of the impact of these “writings” --- these lines and curlicues--- that cover the surface of the earth. Or could it be that our GPS systems and other apps have become the sum of our knowledge of geography. It does seem that the features of static geography are now perceived best from the window of an airplane or the camera of a satellite where rivers become small, undulating lines, mountains are flattened into gentle rises, canyons become cracks in the earth and seas often appear calm, at least from an altitude of 36,000 feet. But that which creates these elements of the earth are always dynamic. The globe is shaped by quakes and wind, landslides and volcanoes, floods and droughts as well as a wealth of human activity that seeks to overcome all that the earth is creating.

As we continue to explore the geography of the land of Israel, we encounter the Sea of Gennesaret, or as we more familiarly name it, the Sea of Galilee. Because of the Great Rift Valley that does stretch all the way through most of East Africa, forming the great lakes of that region, the Jordan River pools its water in this inland sea, at least for a brief time, before the water flows out the south of the sea, forming the Jordan River again. About six miles wide and thirteen miles long, depending upon where one wishes to measure, the sea reminds us that geography always plays a critical part in economy. We may be able to pipe water to deserts to create farmland and build up levees and dikes to bring forth dry land from swamps and seas, but the many aspects of geography still impact economies.

As we would suspect, this sea is much a part of the wealth of this part of the larger hill country of Galilee. Small fishing villages sit along its shores even as the sea is a quick route by boat between one bank and another. Though water for villages is generally drawn out of wells, the sea remains a source of water as well. In the gospel, the sea becomes the stage for revealed truth as a boat filled with disciples is tossed about by a sudden fierce wind, perhaps flowing off the steep hillsides of the eastern shore. The words “Do not be afraid” are offered even as the storm is calmed by other commands. Night time visions on the sea might offer a sight of Jesus walking across the waters. The sea does indeed make it possible to travel

easily eastward from Tiberias to the Decapolis where all sorts of gentiles might be encountered. And the sea can be a stage for teaching.

In today's gospel lesson, we learn of discouraged fishermen washing nets after an unsuccessful night of throwing nets and catching nothing. Simon is summoned by Jesus to use his boat differently, to push it out from shore a bit so that Jesus sit and teach those who line the shore, having followed this rabbi to hear the word of God. This floating "pulpit" makes it possible for more people to hear and see this Christ but there seems to be more to this incident than merely a method for allowing the word to be heard.

Following the teaching, Jesus interacts with Simon, telling him to push out and try fishing again. Simon initially objects but then relents and lets down the nets. This time, as the nets are pulled up, there are so many fish that the weight of the catch threatens to break the nets. Even as another boat is summoned, the catch is so large that the boats begin to sink under the weight of the fish. Suddenly, Simon knows this Jesus to be someone more than some wise carpenter from Nazareth who could know nothing about fishing.

It is then that Jesus reveals the intent of his engaging not only the following crowd but more importantly the fishermen. Again, Simon doubts the wisdom of this Jesus, this one who chooses sinners for his mission. But Jesus reassures him that God will use unexpected voices for the announcement of God's gospel. Those who are called to be disciples are seemingly far less prepared than the learned Pharisees, the richer Sadducees, the fierce Zealots, and even the sacrificing priests. Could it be that the gospel of Christ is often offered more frequently, more genuinely through many who simply serve in the name of Jesus?

Discipleship is a central experience in the life of the church. All are called to follow in the way of Jesus, as he expresses the kingdom of God as the way of God made possible through the activity of the Spirit as it guides and strengthens those who will live gospel even as Jesus did. We may have heard it so often that it has lost its power, but The United Methodist Church continues to proclaim that we are called "To make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." We would want to confess that making disciples is hard work, especially when we arrogantly believe that any success is due to our abilities to speak both winsomely and engagingly and to act with both compassion and justice, forgetting as Paul reminds us in the letter to the Corinthians that it is not any of us alone but God working in one and all. Perhaps Simon learned this lesson as he casts nets into the deep at the direction of the rabbi.

In recent years, the church has inadvertently suffered from clericalism, that is centering its ministry and mission on the pastors of the congregations more than upon the people in the pews. In an effort to better equip women and men to serve in the modern world, ordination has become tied to academic achievement. To be ordained generally requires both a college and seminary education. There are others way to qualify for such credentials but these programs succeed most in creating a sort of second-class pastor, one who will only rarely be appointed to full-time ministry in a church of any size unless she or he has special skills in language. Even then, full participation in the life of the church is denied. Early on, as we remember that John Wesley was a lecturer at Oxford, the church has labored long to create an education for pastors that includes much formal even classical academic training although the requirement to learn the Biblical languages of Greek and Hebrew has been dropped from expectations. Such requirements have sometimes succeeded most in separating the clergy from the people, both in matters of scholarship and activity, thus occasionally but falsely elevating pastors far above others.

It does not, however, require a seminary education to pray. Nor does such an education ensure ability to decide wisely in matters of finance or construction. Additionally, now that the Bible has been translated into most of the languages of the world and study companions including the internet are available even to those who cannot tell the difference between a Hebrew aleph and Greek alpha, perhaps effective studies can be fruitfully conducted by laypeople. Ordination is not required to conduct a funeral service, visit in the hospitals and homes, or strategize for the future. Though sacramental worship remains reserved to those who are voted into full clergy membership, even the waters and word of baptism can be offered by any person in the face of death. Likewise, table fellowship can take the shape of a love feast rather than Holy Communion. The fruitfulness of ministry depends greatly upon the willingness of people other than pastors to become disciples of Jesus.

In the text for today, Luke differs from similar seaside statements found in Matthew and Mark. We may more easily recall the words of Jesus in these gospels as Jesus ordains Simon and Andrew, James and John: “I will make you fish for men.” Rightly so, Jesus’ promise to the disciples in Luke is that they will “catch people”. In Luke’s telling, Simon and others come up empty after fishing all night, suggesting that they are not very skilled fishermen. Rather it is a rabbi who gives them better advice about catching fish. Using seine nets to catch fish is perhaps symbolic of

providing a multitude of programs and possibilities for catching people, for gathering them up into experiences of the presence of God.

A current movement in the church may sound quite classical. Called “Fresh Expressions”, some congregations are now planning gathering activities that occur in other places than the sanctuaries, fellowship halls, and classrooms of the traditional church campus. Dinner Church is possible the most well-know of such gathering as a group of people regularly come together to eat supper, pray for one another, and explore scriptures, sometimes ending with communion. Some gather in restaurants for similar activities, often gaining the interest of those who pass by on their ways to their tables or to the checkout register. Others hike together to a designated place where all rest and spend time talking about faith in the midst of the outdoors. Though later followers of John Wesley might turn in their graves, Fresh Expressions has even found a niche in the bar scene, remembering that soft drinks are usually on the bar’s menu as well as other beverages.

At our Church Conference, the chair announced the formation of a small committee to begin developing a five-year plan for the mission and ministry of this congregation. Part of the plan will surely include new possibilities that arise out of opening up the campus. Might there also be “fresh expressions” of ministry that take up well beyond the open campus into other places within the community where people already gather?

Even as it has often seen itself to be like a boat, the church is called to navigate the sea of life with full knowledge that there will be both success and disappointment, calm and wind-roiled waves, great possibilities and small defeats. And it is the gospel that gives it both power and direction. Are we willing to drop our fragile nets into the deep waters of injustice and despair, of loneliness and grief, of poverty and hatred, confident that God will be working through us? Are we ready to respond as the worship does in Isaiah with an eager “Here I am send me.”?

Let us not be afraid, no matter how inadequate we might decide we might be, as we hear the commands of God, knowing gratefully that God is with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.