**“Deeper Waters”**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

For the 5th Sunday after Epiphany, February 10, 2019

St Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford

When I was a child, the pool we swam in regularly had an L shape to it. At the corner of the L was the shallow end, and heading outwards from the shallow end in either direction were two deep ends. The one to the right had a diving board, and so we spend a lot of time there. But the one on the left had nothing special like that, and so we rarely went there. And, as children do, I began to develop a very specific fear about that side of the pool: living in those deep waters, was an orca, waiting to eat me. I think this may have been around the time that the original Free Willy movie was released. But the orca of my imagination was not so friendly. It’s not clear to me whether the avoidance caused the fear or the fear caused the avoidance, but they functioned in a mutually reinforcing cycle. I just didn’t go there. No big loss, I remember thinking, there was another deep end available to me…and that one had a diving board!

In today’s Gospel Jesus urges his disciples to head out into deep water, and let down their nets. They had been fishing for some time and were undoubtedly tired. Fishing with nets is a very physical demanding task. Their fatigue was doubly so, for all their efforts had yielded little fruit. Perhaps they felt like the Los Angeles Rams after playing an entire Super Bowl’s worth of defense, with just three points to show for it! In the midst of their exhaustion and dejection, Jesus implores them to set out again….this time into deeper waters. And they agree.

I have been to the Sea of Galilee where this episode takes place and I can tell you that it’s understandable why their initial impulse was to avoid the deep waters. The Sea is a big body of water and the deeper waters in the center of it are prone to storms. They can come up quickly and can swamp small fishing boats with little warning. I’m pretty sure there are no orcas there, but nonetheless a healthy fear of the deep waters is prudent for fishermen in small boats.

But these first disciples overcome their fatigue, frustration and fear and say yes to Jesus, and they set out into the deeper waters. They have found the capacity to do something risky, despite all the things that might have held them back. And I have no doubt it is because Jesus went with them. At the start of the story, Jesus is standing on the shore -- separate from them. But by the time he asks them to put out into the deeper waters, he’s gotten into the boat with them. And his presence with them calms their fears, energizes their bodies, and gives them hope that the harvest might yet be plentiful.

Two weeks ago in the sermon time, members of the vestry presented three strategic priorities for St. Paul’s. Over the coming weeks you will hear in the sermons some reflections on each of them. Today’s Gospel passage, about finding the courage, energy and willpower to head out into the deep waters, touches directly on our desire to “Awaken to the needs of the oppressed, alienated, and marginalized, as we seek to create more inclusive community within and beyond our church.”

Perhaps at some point in life, you have attended a diversity seminar at work, or took a cross-cultural sociology class at school, or participated with a community group that offers training around issues of oppression, privilege, and marginalization. If your experience has been like mine, sometimes these are deeply rewarding and other times they leave you feeling like the disciples today -- having expended a lot of energy but having no fish to show for it. Often these short-term explorations of vulnerability and oppression lack the depth needed to be truly rewarding.

From our focus groups and surveys, we know that our church’s collective desire to awaken more fully to the needs of vulnerable people among us comes from less structured experiences of oppression and suffering that many of us have had that have: travel to parts of our country or the world where poverty is more visibly widespread; or relationships you have made locally with people who live in temporary housing or who are seeking sanctuary for fear of deportation; or a sense of growing dread that every time you turn the radio on there will be another story about sexual abuse in the #metoo era, racially-motivated violence, or the resurgence of anti-Semitism.

As your vestry was framing this priority, the call we heard from Jesus and from many of you, was a desire for us to go out into deeper waters: to push through whatever fear, frustration, or fatigue might cause us to stay in the shallow end when it comes to grappling openly with issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, immigration status, age, able-bodiedness, mental health status, or any other dimension of identity that might be a source of vulnerability or marginalization. This has nothing to do with shame or blame. It has to do with a yearning to both speak and listen to perspectives about reality that are that different from our own. Rachel and I are aware from our pastoral care for you, that for many, many of us, avoiding the topic of oppression, marginalization and vulnerability is just not an option. They are ever present in our homes, at our workplaces, in our schools, in the media, and elsewhere. We are also aware of the loneliness and isolation that can obtain when the ways we feel vulnerable and marginalized seem invisible to those with whom we share community. While no part of ourselves is ever invisible to Christ, being the church means allowing our tender spots to be more visible to each other, so that we can empathize with each other’s struggles, bear each other’s burdens, and live in greater solidarity with friends and strangers alike.

And so we name a desire to awaken more fully to the places of marginalization in our communities and in the world. In the past few years, here at St. Paul’s we have stuck our toes in the waters, and even begun wading in. We have a thriving, six-year relationship with medical/community organizations in Leogane, Haiti. A number of parishioners participated in the first Women’s March in January 2017. Our book study of “Waking up White” generated significant conversation and introspection. We have had for two years now a Refugee and Immigrant subcommittee learning more about what it is like to be a new arrival to this country or to live here without permanent legal status. Our screening of Traces of the Trade was attended by over 50 people. There is a soul-hunger within many of us to go deeper in our understanding of and response to the needs of marginalized and vulnerable people, among us, nearby and far away. We feel God beckoning us to learn how to take this hunger, equip it with greater understanding, and find the confidence to respond to the injustices of life with confidence, centeredness, and determination -- individually and as a church.

Today’s observance of Bread for the World Sunday is one way in which we do that. Today we call to mind that what we so often take for granted, many around the world cannot rely on -- our relatively secure access to nutritious food. Today we remind ourselves that 1 in 4 children in the world do not have the nutrition they need. We remember that America and other developed nations’ demand for a first-world diet directly impacts that economic ability of poorer nations to generate their own sustainable food supply. We acknowledge the painful reality that today our planet generates enough food to feed every person who lives here, and yet food insecurity affects literally billions of people in our human family. We spotlight these issues today, and many of us will write letters to our legislator asking for change. But I think that our new priority is Jesus’ way of challenging us to remember that when we close up our envelopes to send them off, we cannot use our satisfaction at a first step taken as an excuse to close up our hearts to so many who lack basic access to nutritious food. We must invite our concern for them to linger in our hearts and minds, and to see what their presence there might do for us.

One last point about all this. Like the disciples heading out into deeper water in today’s Gospel, as we head into deeper waters, we also take Jesus with us. And this means that the journey outwards -- as visible advocates for more just social policy, as partners with others working for more just and inclusive community, as providers of direct care to vulnerable people -- is paralleled by a journey inwards. The vulnerable and oppressed and marginalized people to which we desire to be more awake, are BOTH out there AND in here. All of us are vulnerable people in some way. All of us have had some kind of experience of marginalization, of being oppressed by a power structure that values control over compassion. Our journey “out there” into the deeper waters of the human community in which we live, will only be life-giving if it is accompanied by a journey into the deeper waters of our own vulnerabilities and oppressions. Like the pool I grew up swimming in, there are two deep ends waiting for us. And God beckons us onward. Amen.