

# RELIGION BEYOND THE SANCTUARY<sup>1</sup>

Luke 5: 1-11

A Communion Meditation by Thomas R. McKibbens

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Today I want to think with you about religion beyond the sanctuary, faith beyond the walls. Following the Way of Christ outside the safety and security of the church is an important topic that deserves our time and thought. This communion meditation is intended to begin a fuller discussion of religion beyond the sanctuary.

I

As a backdrop to the topic I invite you to consider a fish story. The scene presented to us in the Luke passage is out beyond the sanctuary. It is religion outside the control of the ecclesiastical authorities. Jesus had tried to teach within the traditional synagogue, but they had thrown him out- almost threw him off a cliff! He was forced to take his faith outside the walls of the sanctuary.

We have this image of the sun just rising above the hills and reflecting on the lake. On the beach by the little village the fishermen, who have worked all night, are busy washing their nets, their boats hauled up on the sand. Crowds of people are listening to Jesus, and they begin to press

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in so much that he is forced to get into one of the boats and move out a few yards into the water to get some breathing space.

We are told nothing of the content of his teaching that morning. We only know he was so charismatic that he attracted working people who would be up at that early hour. We are told that he finished speaking and said to Simon Peter: *Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.* As long as you keep puttering along, a boat's length from the shore, you will only catch little fish. The big ones, the heavy takes, are out in the deep water. Go out there if you want to catch them.

Not every story about Jesus has symbolic significance, and I am not one to see symbolism in every paragraph of the gospel accounts. But Jesus himself makes it symbolic when he says at the end, *Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.*

Every day when we observe the big issues the world is facing, issues of war and peace, of poverty and wealth, of preserving God's good earth for future generations, of reaching out to help victims of disasters, of managing capitalism so that it doesn't forget the needs of the poor, and managing socialism so that it doesn't squelch incentives. The big issues continue to mount up.

And there are local issues we need to face: education and health care, hunger and homelessness, business and family and local

government. Surely, surely, there is a pertinent word from our religious tradition to address all of these issues. But not if we stay in the shallows! *Put out into the deep water*, says Jesus.

If we putter along the safe shoreline of ecclesiastical routine, casting our nets in the familiar shallows of ordinary observance; gathering in the familiar little fish of custom and habitual procedure; sailing within easy swimming distance of the shore; all these provide security and familiarity, but Jesus still calls people to *put out into the deep water*.

It is not my intention in this meditation to make detailed proposals, but I do wish to lay upon the hearts of us all the solemn responsibility which the conditions of our common life lay upon the people of God: *Put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch*.

## II

In the biblical story, Peter speaks out and says exactly what a fisherman would be likely to say to a carpenter who came down to the shore to tell him how to fish. Give him a hammer and nails and he is an authority, but who is this carpenter to tell us fishermen how and when and where to fish? So we get this polite and rather strained response, which I imagine is said through clinched teeth: *Master, we have worked all night long and have caught nothing*.

What he didn't say, but what was surely in Peter's mind, was the question: didn't Jesus know that it was useless to go fishing in the morning if you had not caught anything all night? Generations of fishing experience had taught them to say NO to daytime fishing. Peter was thinking the same thing God's people too often think: "We've never done it that way before!"+

And so when Peter has come clean with his doubts, founded on his long experience as a professional fisherman, he reluctantly agrees prompted by his love and respect for Jesus. "OK, if you insist, we'll give it a try.+ And off they went, without breakfast, nets half cleaned, and damaged or not mended from a night's work.

They launched out into the deep water, tired and full of doubts, but confident of this one thing: that it was Christ's will, and that is what mattered most. It is that kind of love and devotion to the living Christ that enables us to launch out into deeper waters. A genuine love and devotion to Christ allows us to hear his slightest whisper as if it is rolling thunder, and launch we will despite our doubts.

I am struck in this story by their willingness to try something new in spite of their past failure. All night long they had been dropping their nets overboard, and drawing them in. They had hauled in those nets in the darkness with no sign of a catch. Then overboard with them again, and more pulling at the heavy nets, till the dawn began to show, and all in vain.

Now, because he asked them, they were willing to do it all over again with even less potential for good results.

If they had been like some of us, they would have said, "Oh, we tried this once before! Besides, we're tired! We've been at this a long time! There's nothing left to give. It's all I can do to get here occasionally for Sunday worship."

With the presence of Christ in their boat, they rubbed their eyes to get the sleepiness out; they bundled their half-washed nets into the boat once more; and they shoved the boat out into the blue waters of Christ's bidding. That takes trust; and that takes leaders; and that is the sort of leadership this church has nurtured over the years.

### III

Before we leave the scene of this boat striking out into deep water, let us remind ourselves that the symbolism of this story does not counsel foolishness. Launching into deep waters requires skill and experience. When Jesus called upon those fishermen to launch into deep water, he knew that they had a lifetime of experience, and if a storm arose, those fishermen knew what to do.

I mention that in the wake of the recent arrest of a church group in Haiti who were detained under suspicion of child trafficking. If indeed they were well intentioned as they claimed to be, they were like sailors in a

storm with no experience in sailing. Although the two Southern Baptist churches involved had conducted mission trips before, their trip to Haiti was their first experience in disaster relief. They were like inexperienced sailors launching into deep water in the midst of a storm! Faith is not the same as foolishness!

Yet there is still the call of Christ that we cannot evade: *Put out into deep water....* There is a comfort level in the shallows, but the call is to let down our nets in deeper water. What could this call mean for us? Where should we steer our boat in order to let down our nets in deeper water?

In the great tradition of the congregational form of governance, the answer to that question is not dropped from heaven or dictated by some ecclesiastical authority above us. It is worked out by a smart and spiritually sensitive congregation as we work collegially in plotting the course we will take as we approach our third century.

If we are launching out in obedience to the whisper of Christ, seeking divine direction as to the way we should steer this boat, we may be sure of this: there will be good results. The results are symbolized in this story by a haul of fish so great that the nets began to break—symbolized by the fact that an entire boat was too small to carry all the fish.

Those fishermen that day could not have passed the most

elementary course in theology. All they knew was that when they heard his voice, his words spoke to their deepest needs, and they wanted to be with him and learn from him more than anything else in the whole world. So they responded when he called them, and went on to live lives they never would have imagined and could hardly conceive.

But the first step was Peter saying to Jesus, *If you say so, I will let down the nets.*

#### IV

The great tradition of this church is to gather on Sundays in this place to hear again the word of God, to discern the course we should take, and to find strength and encouragement in our journey. We are all aware that we are a part of a world with deep problems, and we face deep challenges.

The good news is that Christ did not send the disciples out into deeper water alone. When he called on them to let down their nets in deeper water, he was going with them. The Spirit of Christ is going with us, as we face the sunrise of a new day.