

Isaiah 6:1-8
Psalm 138
Luke 5: 1-11
Epiphany 5

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Year C

My Fisherman

Startle us, O God, with your truth and remind us, once again, that you call us to be your people in the world, the body of your son, Jesus Christ. Give us strength, faith, and courage to be a faithful church and faithful disciples. Amen.

Our scripture from Luke this morning is one I can identify with. Mind you there were 2,000 years between the Sea of Galilee and my trip to Disney with my brother, Mark, but it is indeed a thrill to catch more fish than anyone would believe possible in a short span of time.

Let me explain my love for fishing. It might surprise some of you to think of me on fishing boats at 10 am in the ocean when guys are popping cold cans of beer. Or deep-sea fishing in what's called "The Redneck Riviera" for a fish I'd never heard of (Cobia) and risked bouncing a check to try and catch. (The charter was more expensive than I'd imagined. I had no idea what was left in my checking account so I handed over a check and hoped for the best. It worked.) I've fished in the Florida Keys, Martha's Vineyard, and on party boats off the Jersey Shore.

I do this with my brother, Mark, who is we say these days is "developmentally disabled." A big upgrade from our childhood when he was sometimes called "Retardo."

Mark loves fishing more than almost anything else and it's something he does as well as everyone else. When he turned 40 thirty years ago, I realized to have a real relationship with him, we needed to make memories of our own and I started taking him fishing every year or so. One night after a day on the high seas we had dinner at a restaurant that featured a belly dancer and Mark got to stuff a dollar bill in her waistband.

One year when I was flush with a book advance, I took Mark to Disneyland. We stayed in a lovely hotel on the property and really had the best time. One of the highlights was fishing in a Disney lake that was incredibly well-stocked. I hired a boat and Mark caught 30 fish in 40 minutes. I stopped counting at some point. But Mark was thrilled. He didn't care if the lake was stocked. He thought it was fantastic and had the best time and so did I.

My fishing trips with my brother taught me to appreciate the brother I had. Growing up, I wanted a different brother; a quarterback or a swim team captain whose cool friends might notice his shy and studious sister. I would have traded Mark in a heartbeat for someone who made me fit in instead of stand out.

It took several decades, but I finally realized my brother Mark has had more impact on my spiritual life than almost anything or anyone else. But for years in the shallow waters of my own life, I didn't think there was anything more to see or learn.

Transformation can come at any time even when you're on the familiar shores of your own life and have called it quits. Sometimes it's when we've given up, let go, that change happens and Jesus or the Holy Spirit show up to lead us into deeper waters where God's abundance so often waits.

Simon, James and John had given up for the day. And then, something astonishing happened.

Stunned by the enormity of the massive catch, Peter tells Jesus he's an unworthy and underserving sinner.

How relatable is that?

Jesus doesn't say to Peter "No, you're not." Jesus says "Be not afraid."

Expanding on this are words often misattributed to Nelson Mandela that were actually written by the self-help guru Marianne Williamson.

Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us... Your playing small does not serve the world. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

I sailed into deep waters in fishing boats with my brother, Mark, not expecting revelations, but because I wanted to have a real relationship with him. I'd see him a few times a year at family gatherings when there would be so much activity we didn't spend much actual time together.

I set sail from those familiar shores unwittingly, but found there were treasures in the deep.

Peter's unworthiness resonates with mine. Mark keeps introducing me to the sister that fails him over and over; the sister who would have him come and live in her extra bedroom and find him a job at her food co-op or as greeter at Wal Mart. The sister who would always speak up when someone says 'That's so retarded.' The sister who would stop nagging him about still watching "The Three Stooges" and "Leave it to Beaver."

Once while getting Mark a guest pass at the pool he started chatting with the woman at the front desk. His impatient sister said, *Mark come on, we don't have all day.*

The woman at the front desk looked at me and smiled. "There's always enough time to be kind." Ouch.

Mark is unfailingly kind. “Spiritual practice” means nothing to Mark; loving kindness is his way of being in the world. As for loving your neighbors as yourself? Mark told me once when he returned to the pew after healing prayers that he prayed for those people in California who got killed. It was a few weeks after a mass shooting.

Mark made me notice the courage and dignity in forgotten lives lived on the sidelines and makes me slow down in a 24/7 multi-tasking and wired world.

The most meaningful work in my career has involved bearing witness as a reporter, author, or chaplain and priest. “Whatever you do to the least of these, you do unto me.” Jesus made it pretty clear.

Early in my chaplaincy training, a schizophrenic patient on a locked ward waved to me the same way Mark does. It was then I understood how he pointed the way.

As the decades of our lives unfold, I realize that my love for Mark is like a pair of the 3D glasses we wear at his favorite Disney movies because he makes me see dimensions of life I’d otherwise miss.

Mark takes me deeper into what it means to be alive, and I never resurface without having been drenched in blessing.

The world sees him as having “special needs.” But now I understand it is I who have special need of him.

AMEN