

God, from fishing fleets and busy harbors, you gather simple sailors. Through persecution and injustice, you call brave prophets. God, gather us in, surprise us with our potential, and give us the ears to hear your call. Amen.

February 10, 2019 – Luke 5:1-11

“Hidden Potential”

If you'll remember from last week, Jesus had so enraged his audience while preaching in his hometown, that they drove him out of the synagogue and had every intention of throwing him off a nearby cliff. But he somehow mysteriously escaped their clutches and went along his way.

A lot has happened between that reading and today's reading. But suffice it to say he acquired quite the reputation as a healer of diseases and a traveling preacher. Despite the reception at his hometown, his celebrity status among others seem to just grow and grow.

And it's during that time that he made the acquaintance of Simon. Simon had certainly witnessed this miracle-worker in action. In fact, in between preaching gigs, Jesus would hang out at Simon's home, once even healing Simon's mother-in-law, who had been suffering from a fever.

But today would be different. Today Simon would no longer stand on the sidelines as a witness of Jesus' words and ways. But instead, would experience Jesus personally. And it all happened one morning along the shores of Lake Gennesaret, known to many as the Sea of Galilee. Gennesaret's waters supported a booming fishing industry, with 230 boats regularly working the lake and their catch dried and exported all over the Roman world. (<http://www.seetheholyland.net/tag/lake-of-gennesaret/>)

And Simon's boat would have been one of those more than 200 boats, dependent as he was upon the lake's bounty for his livelihood. But on this particular day, he wasn't feeling as if the lake was so bountiful because he had spent the whole night fishing along the shores, as he always did, but this time without any luck.

So rather than feel sorry for himself, Simon decided to busy himself with cleaning his fishing nets. And that's when Jesus happened along, followed by the huge crowd of people he always seemed to be attracting lately. They were getting a little unruly, so Jesus, recognizing his friend Simon, hopped into Simon's boat and asked him to put out just a little way, so he could continue his teaching without the danger of being mauled by the overenthusiastic crowd.

Some of the bays along the lake were semicircular in shape. And those, combined with the slope of the nearby hills, formed a natural amphitheater. In fact, acoustical research has demonstrated that as many as 7000 people could hear a person speaking from a boat in one of the bays. (<http://www.seetheholyland.net/tag/lake-of-gennesaret/>) So Jesus took advantage of those acoustics and finished up what was presumably another one of this well-received sermons.

But looking around, he noticed Simon wasn't as happy as he was about how things were going. After all, Simon's livelihood depended on his ability to catch fish, and the previous night's fishing expedition had been a disaster.

So Jesus told Simon to put out into the deep. Something that would have made absolutely no sense at all to Simon or any other fisher. Everyone knew that you did your fishing long the shallows at nighttime, where fish were active and feeding closer to the surface, not in the deep during the day. (<https://biblehelpsinc.org/publication/the-miraculous-draught-of-fish/>)

So why should an experienced fisherman take the advice of a carpenter-turned-preacher? I don't know, but after just a little bit of protest, he agreed. Maybe he thought there wasn't anything to lose. Or maybe he recognized a look in the eye of Jesus or a smile of confidence on his face. A look that told Simon something great was about to happen.

So after following Jesus' instructions, Simon managed to haul in so many fish that the nets began to break. So many fish, in fact, that even though Simon had signaled another boat to help him bring in the catch, both boats were close to sinking with their heavy loads.

Let me pause here to ask you not to miss the message of abundance in this story. A message that is repeated over and over in the gospels, whether they're talking about a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread that manage to feed thousands of hungry people. Or they're talking about water that's turned into 20 to 30 gallons of the best-tasting wine. The message is the same: God's grace is over-the-top. As over-the-top as this morning's catch of fish.

But back to the story. Upon seeing this spectacular display, Simon fell to his knees and instead of saying, "This is fantastic, Jesus! I want as much of this as you can give!" Simon said something very strange. He said, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful person!"

And Jesus looked down at Simon and said, "What the hell, Simon! You're acting like a darn fool!" Okay, he didn't say that. I made that part up. But he probably should have.

Possibly the best thing that had ever happened to him in his entire life, and Simon told Jesus to go away. Simon seemed to feel unworthy of this good thing, this divine miracle that had happened to him. He felt unworthy of God's favor. And I want to know where he received that message?

I wonder if it's not the same place that all of us receive it. From the pulpits of our past. I wonder if Simon, like today's gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people, had been told that he was less than a full member of God's family. Galilee itself was seen as a remote backwoods area separated from Jerusalem, the cultural and religious center of Judaism. Simon and his cohorts would have been judged by others as ignorant at best and perhaps as simple-minded sinners at worst. (<http://www.bible.ca/ef/expository-john-1-45-46.htm>)

So it is with many of us. Institutional religion – and in particular, right-wing Christianity – has kept the LGBT community at bay, telling us that we are abominations because of who and how we love; it has said we are abhorrent because of how we present ourselves to the world; and declared us to be sinful people outside the bounds of God's love and grace.

And after you hear it enough, you find yourself beginning to believe it, don't you? You know there's nothing you can do to change who you are, so you just accept the fact that, like Simon, you're a sinful person. And when you encounter anyone who claims to be a follower of Jesus, your response is the same as Simon's: "Go away from me," you say, "for you must not know who you're talking to. Go away from me, because everyone else has."

But Jesus won't be drawn into a debate about saints and sinners. Instead, he looks deep into Simon's eyes and sees something that even Simon is unaware of. Jesus sees potential. And he takes a moment to tell Simon of that potential. He tells him that Simon has the gift of catching people in the net of God's grace. And if you would have asked Simon, he probably never would have suspected such a gift had been so divinely planted within him. All it needed was a little care and nurture for it to grow and mature.

We all have gifts. Gifts that God can use. So stop listening to the lies that the churches of your childhood may have said about you. Know that you are loved by God and loveable by your very nature. You may be broken, but it's nothing that a community like this one can't fix. If you allow it. Don't turn away, and don't push away the love that is offered. We can't change the past. But we can make way for a better future. One full of promise and potential.

If Jesus could find potential in Peter, then you can be assured there's plenty of potential in you, too. And after all the negative messages you've received, there's probably plenty of room for love, too.

May you discover that redemptive love of Jesus. And may it provide relief for your tired and broken spirit, while calling forth such potential within you as you never imagined possible. Amen.