

Deep Spirituality

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

January 22, 2023

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

I want to share with you a portion of a presentation that was made by Jennifer Henry, Executive Minister, Organizational Development and Strategy at The United Church of Canada. She spoke at the Regional Council AGM held here at St. Andrew's last fall, and she gave us a glimpse of the Call and Vision that has emerged of the United Church of Canada. In this short clip, Jennifer makes a case for how the United Church, the national church, and our individual Communities of Faith, are called to go deep, to deep spirituality. You should know that Jennifer tested positive for COVID and couldn't come physically to speak here, but here she is, speaking via Zoom. [Video begins.]

[Transcript from Jennifer Henry's presentation]

I want to talk to you about an ancient call story and a newly articulated call for the United Church of Canada in these turbulent times and I'm going to begin with the old story, and it goes a bit like this.

Jesus is standing by a body of water – let's call it White Water or Trout Lake or maybe even Lake Superior – and he's speaking to a crowd, an engaged pumped-up group of folks. The story says the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God. But instead of keeping his focus on them, reveling in their attention, he's drawn to two boats at the shore of the lake and to fisher folk who aren't even really listening to him. They've had a hard night. They're tired, discouraged, maybe even a bit despairing. They've weathered tough times, worn out from the weight of, say, something like pandemic, growing secularization, less and less folks to share the work in their community.

And, you know what? He goes over and he gets in their boat. Jesus has a whole crowd who are listening attentively to him. But he goes straight for the fishers, directly to those distracted, tired, and despairing ones, and he draws them out. He puts himself in their boat. He gets into one the one belonging to Simon and he asks him to go out a little way from the shore. For a while, he uses the natural amplification system to continue speaking to the crowds, but I think it's also a chance to talk right into those fishermen's ears. They don't really have anywhere to hide. They're in the front pew of church now.

Jesus's next "ask" to them is a bigger one, "Pull out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch."

It's such a compelling image – you're in deep, in deep water, a sense of being over your head in potential trouble, dangerous, ominous. And yet it has another meaning – that sense of plunging into importance of going deep in challenge, in commitment, in faithfulness. Skimming the surface is not enough. Plunge yourselves into meaning. Soak yourselves in commitment. Jesus compels those fisher folk into the deep, deep in the sense of filled up by the Creator, being truly seen by Jesus, being pressed into purpose by the Spirit. Deep, as in the deep love of God for us. Deep, as in the love we're called to give to neighbour. Or maybe deep as in the hard work of addressing unearned privilege in our lives and striving for equity in an unjust world. Deep as in the commitment to be a repentant Church seeking right relation and the someday – some day, possibility of reconciliation.

Jesus presses them into the deep. Deep in belonging and challenge, calling them to live their best lives in compassion and justice. He entreats them into the deeper water where their very souls might be awash in spirit. And the invitation is to us, too. Deep spirituality. Go deep into relationship with our living God and all that she brings in belonging and challenge. Go deep, my church, into a spirituality that sustains and inspires.

I'm going to take a moment to pause and ask you, "Where is Christ showing up and inviting you, compelling you to go deep?" I just invite us to take a few minutes of silence with that question. [silent moment]. [End of video clip.]

"Come and see!" Jesus in John's version of the story says as he calls them. The first, we are told, are John's disciples. Jesus asks, "What do you want?"

In the Gospel of John, following Jesus has a strong relational aspect. Jesus wants a deep connection with his diverse group of followers. John's Gospel is unique in telling us that Jesus used the word "abide" frequently – abide in me, and I will abide in you. Deep interrelationship – abiding.

To follow Jesus is to have deep connection, relationship, with God and Jesus, and with one another.

Jesus in the John Call story moves on to brothers, fishers. Scholars suggest that these sets of brothers were likely under contract with the Roman Empire. "As brothers, and possibly members of a cooperative with James and John (Matthew 4:21), they have purchased a lease or contract with Rome's agents that allows them to fish and obligates them to supply a certain quality of fish."¹

By following Jesus, they are following their hearts, probably the opposite of what those around them would call "common sense." Changing their allegiance from a merciless Roman boss, to following a merciful God, based only on Jesus' word.

"What is it that you want?" Is he asking that question, again and again, of us? Ordinary fishers, sisters Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus, regular people, some of us saying we are too old or too young, not charismatic enough for this mission of Jesus.

It might help for us again to be reminded that Jesus did not call disciples because of their resumes, or because of their profound knowledge, or their ability to organize people and inspire large numbers of people. Jesus calls not to our skills, or brilliance – *his invitation to come and see speaks to our heart and faith.*

Call is all about heart, and connection, and a willingness to risk throwing away common sense that we are taught, to dive right in. John bookends his Gospel with one final poignant encounter with Jesus after he has been crucified. John, the disciple, recognizes him and excitedly yells, "It is the Lord!"

Simon Peter, always the impetuous one, leaps into the water and races to the shore to Jesus. The rest of the fishers are left to secure the boat and unload the miraculous catch of fish they caught with Jesus' help.

¹ In her commentary on Matthew's Gospel for January 22, 2023 (Working Preacher) Jillian Engelhardt draws from the work of Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*. Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY (2000), page 121.

Deep Spirituality. What might that look like? I think it looks like Peter, not thinking too much, or calculating risk, before he jumps into the deep. What might it mean to just lead with our hearts when we feel called? Can we just take the risk?

Can you who are seeking reconciliation in a relationship that has long languished, just plunge in, knowing you are not alone?

Can you who have long felt the nagging of an issue, in spite of friends or family telling you that you have lost your mind, can you take the risk, lead with your heart?

I can't remember my first experience, personally, as a child, jumping into water and swimming. I DO remember, however, Tracey's and my first experiences in Parents and Tots swimming lessons. It was terrifying to be asked to let our little babies go under. I don't think that our fear helped our children. But in spite of the parents, Sophia and Benjamin swim now. I think deep spirituality for St. Andrew's United Church, our community, might be like that.

Seeing ourselves change, sometimes even languish, and fail, and struggle. We are not the St. Andrew's of old. We are a new and yet unclear community of fishers of people. Well, some of us might be the people being fished. The thing to remember in all of this, though, is that Jesus calls us beloved. Jesus IS calling us. Calling us first, to relationship with him and with one another. Then his call is to invite others to come and see. Amen