

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship  
Anita Rediger  
February 7, 2010

“Launch Out Into the Deep...”

I’ve never been a fan of really high places OR really deep water. Perhaps, this is a result of being a prairie person. On the wide-open prairie, there aren’t any high places...and there isn’t much water, either! Upon moving to Indiana, I did attempt to climb the silo – but I did that only once! Enough of that! Then, while visiting friends one time, it was decided that some of the group would go boating on a nearby lake. Alex must have been about 7 years old or so at the time. He went on ahead with some of the others. Even though he was safely attired with a life-vest and responsible adults were in the boat, I will never forget the sickening feeling that flooded over me when, upon my arrival, I saw the boat speeding past with Alex – alone – on the tube behind the boat. The boaters headed farther out across the lake and I felt myself become weak in the knees. All I could think of was Alex (my baby)...and the depth of the water below him and how badly I wanted him back on shore where I could see him playing safely in the sand.

This morning’s scripture evokes for me some of those same feelings that I’ve had when I been in those *uncomfortably high* or *fearfully deep* places. It’s that “pit-of-the-stomach” feeling that’s accompanied by a distressing sense of paralysis! When I read of Jesus saying to Simon, “launch out into the deep,” I feel myself heighten with alarm!

“Launch out into the deep and put down your nets.” These words are the ones in this morning’s account which jump out at me and slow my reading. These words make me stop and go back to pay more attention to “what’s going on here?!”

The story begins this way, “Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, (the Sea of Galilee) and the crowd was pressing in on him...he got into one of the boats, one belonging to Simon. Jesus asked Simon to “put out a little way from the shore.” I like this picture: it’s like this... Jesus - he’s getting acquainted with the peoples of Galilee. News – it’s circulating about this man who opened the scriptures in ways unlike other teachers they had known before. And, it wasn’t only *his words*, but also *his ways* which drew folks to him; especially the persons who make up “crowds.” Jesus’ words offered promise for their all too familiar (and seemingly hopeless, meaningless) conditions; illness, oppression and enslavement. Jesus’ ways demonstrated healing, release and recovery. No wonder, crowds gathered around Jesus to “hear” the “word of God!” Jesus came proclaiming a new time – the fulfillment, the incarnation, of God’s kingdom...on earth. (“Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news.’” Mark 1:14).

The good news – the gospel – I believe it is articulated for us in Luke 4: after reading from the Isaiah scroll, “Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down, saying ‘Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.’” The good news is this: that the “anointed one” has come to “bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to

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the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:14-21) No wonder crowds of hungering, longing people gathered wherever Jesus went!

Returning now to today's reading: we've heard that on this particular morning, (the scene is wonderfully described for us) there are two empty boats, Simon and the other fishermen are on the shore busy with their nets. They had been fishing all night. They must have been tired. Yet, the nets needed mending and washing. The nets needed to be carefully folded - so that they wouldn't be a tangled mess for the next night's work of fishing the lake. Jesus comes into this ordinary, daily work setting. Jesus has come to the lakeshore and the crowds weren't far behind. Actually, the crowd was so close, that it was "pressing in on him!" (Thoughts about being in the cow lot.)

Interestingly, last week's scripture, also recounted for us Jesus' involvement with a crowd. A once friendly gathering had turned into an angry mob which cornered Jesus as they "dragged him to the brow of the hill" with clear intentions to hurl him to his death. With his back to the very edge of the abyss, he had "passed through them and went on his way." This time, another crowd gathers. One, which for the moment at least, gathers with a very different spirit. Nonetheless, Jesus is again at their mercy as they press against him toward the sea. Jesus, this time backed up against the shoreline, needs a space from which to speak to them - so after climbing into one of the boats, he asks Simon "to put out a little way from shore...then Jesus sat down and taught the crowds from the boat." I picture it this way: the waters, quiet at this early hour, reflecting the colors of the morning light; carry Jesus' voice crisply toward shore.

Simon and Jesus - together in the boat - were only "a little way out." The waters weren't rough or dark...and they certainly weren't deep...I like this picture! What a nice story, what a nice place for it to end!!!...but it doesn't...actually, the *real story* hasn't even hardly started! Instead, now as story slows down and we become privy to a conversation between Jesus and Simon, let's pay close attention!

"When Jesus had finished speaking (to the crowd), he turned to Simon and said, "Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch...(NRSV)." I feel for Simon. Remember, he's been up all night, he's tended to his equipment...and at least for the last night - it's all been for nothing - Simon says to Jesus, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing..." At that moment, what was it like for Simon to be told to move out into the deeper waters and let down the nets again...these can't have been easy words for Simon to hear after his unproductive night - and from a carpenter's son! I would have loved to see the look on his face! However, the narrative moves quickly into the next sentence. Simon continues, "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." What authentic expression fills these two sentences: the first one with words of fatigue and

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frustration; the second one filled with faith. How was it that Simon was able to respond in this way? I can identify really well with his first statement. “Oh, it’s all been for nothing...” Life can feel so meaningless. Daily life can seem unsatisfying and unproductive and to make matters worse we may have to face the same tasks and persons again tomorrow! So how was it that Simon risked stepping out of the conventional wisdom of the fishing village to – in the middle of the morning- to “launch out into the deep and to let down his nets?” Fish were best caught at night! (Everyone knows that!)

Don’ forget – Simon’s fishing partners were right there on the shore along with this good sized crowd. What would others say and think as Jesus and Simon put out into the deep? Did his fellow fishermen shake their heads and laugh? They must have really hooted and hollered when they saw Simon cast the net into the water!

What was it that stirred Simon to follow Jesus instruction? Why had Simon even allowed Jesus into the boat in the first place?

Simon, too, is like the people of the crowd. He’s learning to know Jesus. He’s experienced the life-giving way of Jesus (remember Jesus’ visit at his mother-in-law’s house?). Simon has allowed Jesus into his world and now even into his old habits and routines. We don’t exactly know what Simon believed about Jesus, but we certainly know that he believed Jesus! Simon believed Jesus above all else...

So the nets were cast into the lake. They nets were filled with so many fish that they began to break. Beckoning for the boat of James and John, soon both boats were filled to the point of sinking...and the message wasn’t lost on Simon...instead of rejoicing in this new economic windfall – and devising a plan to get to market as quickly as possible - Simon fell to his knees in recognition of God’s upheaval of everything that he had always assumed. Nothing would ever be the same again for he had seen the Lord...and he knew it. From the fish-covered hull, Jesus lifts Simon’s face... “don’t be afraid... it doesn’t have anything to do about how you have seen yourself in the past, this is about the future and you can trust me to go with you. From now on, you’ll be sharing this good news with others.” “They brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.”

This is an incredible story of encountering Jesus. For me, it is a teasingly, challenging metaphor for the journey of faith. First, Jesus simply requests of Simon the use of his boat. Next, Simon is asked to “put out a bit from shore. Seated beside him in the boat, Simon listens as Jesus teaches. But when he had finished speaking to the crowd...Jesus asks a bit more, “Simon, let’s go a bit farther, launch out into the deep.. but even that’s not enough... “and let down the nets...” Finally, no words are needed and Simon releases the boat all together... Simon’s pilgrimage of faith is so much like ours...sometimes he is able to take the next steps; at other times his faith falters and his witness, as well. (remember, in the midnight courtyard Simon Peter’s exclamation, “I never knew the

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man.”) Yet, Jesus continued to call to Simon – not just once – but over and over – Jesus called him to leave everything he had ever understood and feared, to embrace a new way of living. In the same way, his call continues for us, today.

On another early morning, along another seaside, Jesus once again stands on the lakeshore...again the nets are empty of fish...and again Jesus is aware. In strangely familiar language the carpenter’s son gives out advice to the seasoned fishermen... “cast the net on the right side,” and they obey. Once again, the nets are filled to overflowing...as well as their hearts, as they recognize the risen Lord. (John 21) The risen Jesus, made known to Mary as he spoke her name, in the breaking of the bread with the ones on the Emmaus Road and to yet others as their nets were filled to abundance with fish... loaves and fishes...with more than enough with baskets left over...

I love the old adage, “Ships are safe in the harbor, but that’s not what ships are made for.” I love the adage, but I am challenged by its truth.

What are we made for? What happens to us when we become acquainted with Jesus and risk trusting his ways...? Where and how does Jesus appear to us when we were least expecting it? Aren’t these our faith-filled questions?

Eduard Schweizer describes faith this way “not as assent to statements previously preached, but as trust in Jesus’ call to try once more, contrary to all dictates of reason.” Rowan Williams says, that “to say that we trust in Jesus is the equivalent of saying that we believe in Jesus above all things; Jesus is where we belong, the one to whom we belong.”

We’re not fisherman. We’re not part of the ancient Galilean crowds, but each of us has a place in the kingdom – today. With Jesus is where we belong. For each one of us the particulars will be different, but the call is the same...“launch out into the deep, let down your nets! Come just as you are! I’ll show you a new way. I won’t leave you...contrary to all dictates of reason!”

I believe that part of the delight which we share as Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship is that we’ve experienced together a “launching out into the deep!” Of course, on the pilgrimage of faith this brings us into new places with new questions. But, we know that Jesus is in the boat with us...and that he – with a twinkle in his eye – will continue to invite us to “let down the nets!” Dear brothers and sisters, may we encourage one another as we seek to be real-life disciples of Jesus Christ – however surprising that may be!! And as we travel, may we speak these words of Jesus to one another, “Don’t be afraid!” AMEN

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