

**Sermon at St. Andrew's Church**  
**Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany – C – February 6, 2022**  
**by the Rev. Connie Jones**

*Luke 5:1-11*

I don't go fishing because I'm scared of boats.  
 But I've always been intrigued by Jesus' call to his disciples to fish for people.  
 He's speaking to commercial fishermen in their own language, of course,  
 but really, he's asking them to follow him,  
 and ultimately *be* him to everybody they meet.

We don't want to overdo this metaphor of fishing.  
 Caught fish are helpless, dragged by force out of their habitat,  
 judged by their size and weight, and sold for profit to become somebody's dinner.  
 That's not how a disciple, how the church, would treat people, right?

But ruminating on this,  
 I remembered a day deep-sea fishing with my father and brother when I was 12.  
 Even being seasick couldn't spoil the day, especially that thrill of hope –  
 throwing out a line with bait on a hook.  
 The surface of the water was opaque.  
 The fish, if they were there, invisible to the eye.  
 Just *anything* could be under there,  
 and I could catch it if I made just the right move.

And I wonder, could fishing for people be something like that?  
 People on the outside are sort of opaque, aren't they?  
 You never know just what's beneath their surface.  
 So (if you'll stay with me here and you are the fisherman)  
 what is the hook, what is the bait, and what might a big fish be?

Well, fish rarely swim to the top of the water and reveal themselves,  
 and people don't show themselves easily either.  
 So the hook might be a well-considered question, one that can't be answered yes or no.  
 You let the fish make the next move,  
 so ask your question without knowing where the conversation will go.  
 Hold the rod gently – don't argue or judge, don't rush the conclusion.

Ask with an open mind –  
 signaling as best you can that you don't intend to judge, or argue.  
 Be gentle and show respect, but be curious.

*Feel* the story like the rod in your hand.. Listen for any subtext of pain, or fear.  
 Speak as little as possible, except to show you understand.  
 Briefly name it, perhaps.....were you afraid?  
 From time to time you might say, Tell me a little more.  
 And don't try to fix the story-teller – just understand them.

### **Have you seen W. Kamau Bell on TV?**

He's a high-stakes interviewer on CNN,  
 a Black guy with an outgoing personality and a ready laugh,  
 who once had long and deep conversation  
 with members of a chapter of the Ku Klux Klan on their own turf. Amazing.

I heard this week about Jon Ronson,  
 a BBC journalist with a podcast called "Things Fell Apart,"  
 which investigates the earliest origins of various culture wars.  
 One story looks back at the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s,  
 and the public's near-panic about being close to an infected person,  
 or even a well person who is gay.  
 They were treated like the Bible's lepers.  
 And their isolation just worsened their experience of a disease they knew would kill  
 them.

Anyway, Ronson tracked down a survivor, Steve Pieters,  
 who one day on TV was interviewed at length by Tammy Faye Baker.  
 This story is also central to the recent movie, "The Eyes of Tammy Faye."  
 Bakker had the grace to ask Steve this –  
 Is it true that people are afraid to touch you,  
 even breathe the same air in a room with you?  
 As she listened intently, he said yes, it was true.  
 Filled with compassion,  
 though surrely anticipating the backlash from conservative evangelicals, Tammy said.  
 "Jesus, you know, loves us through anything."

Many of you know another story from the '80s,  
 of how our own Llew Roberts saw AIDS patients here in Norfolk  
 alone like Pieters, bank accounts empty, even going without meals.  
 She organized a food ministry to them, recruited an army of cooks –  
 and drivers who'd not only deliver food, but visit with the recipients –  
 yes, breathing the air of their homes, and maybe most importantly,  
 hearing whatever story they had to tell.

**There's a saying in the Talmud**, the ancient commentary on Hebrew Scripture, that says "God created [human beings] because he loves the stories."

Is that why the Bible is one story after another,  
complicated ones with no pat, single interpretation?

They pull you in:

Once upon a time a man was attacked by robbers on his way to Jericho..... or  
One day three angels came down the road to visit Abraham and his wife Sarah..... or  
Jesus stopped at a well and asked an uppity woman for a drink of water.  
Stories like this that reveal *new meaning* every time they are retold,  
as if God himself is doing the retelling.

But I suspect that it is our own unique stories that God loves best.

As spiritual leader Paula d'Arcy says,

"God comes to you every day, disguised as your own life."

But it's also in stories, real and deep ones, where we most surely find each other.

And at one level or another, by God, fall in love with each other.

**Fishing for people doesn't** require a fishing licence --

no advanced degree or second language, no physical specifications.

You needn't be heroic and seek out the KKK.

Visits to a hospital or a jail not required.

Because every day you'll encounter plenty of people  
just brimming with one-of-a-kind stories they want to tell --  
to a kind listener who won't judge or dismiss them.

Your quipment consists only of *curiosity* and *kindness*.

I doubt that God needs you to recite a creed about love.

I think God just wants you to get out there and *do it*.

I think the point about Jesus isn't to talk about him, but to *be* him.

So love whoever is in front of you.

Cast your line into the deep waters of other people's stories.

Don't be afraid. You will only deepen your own soul.

And the crazy thing is, when a line is cast into deep and dark waters,  
when stories are told truly and heard well,

when pain and joy are received without judgment and hearts connect --  
*the Holy Spirit will be present*,

doing that deep and mystical work that the Spirit does.

And.....you might never have even mentioned Jesus's name!

Start today! You already have your credentials!

**I'll end with** a wonderful short prayer that Andie shared with us this past week,

from Thich Nhat Hanh, the well-loved Buddhist mystic  
who woke up in heaven just a couple of weeks ago.

Waking up this morning, I smile.

Twenty-four brand new hours are before me.

I vow to live fully in each moment & to look on all beings with eyes of  
compassion. Amen