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The Other Side of Fear

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Former Methodist bishop, pastor and professor of homiletics, Will Willimon wrote about the reaction of pastors after hearing Jim Wallis speak about the renewal of inner-city churches. Jim Wallis is a religious researcher and speaker who also writes for Sojourner magazine. In his talk, Wallis described a number of churches that had been in decline – not only were the numbers of members getting smaller, so was the energy and engagement in worship services. In different ways, the churches Wallis spoke about found their connection to the Holy Spirit, discovered their mission and purpose and tried new ways to live into that mission, and this created a sense of new life. Will Willimon wrote that he was inspired by Jim Wallis’s talk and found it hopeful. But he was shocked when his colleagues who heard the same talk had a completely different reaction.

Willimon wrote that most were angry with Wallis. They accused him of being unrealistic, dismissed him as “seeing the church through rose colored glasses”, a few even accused Wallis of lying.

When he had the chance later that same day, Willimon spoke to Jim Wallis and told him how he was shocked and disappointment at his colleague’s response to what Wallis had reported. Jim Wallis responded that he was not surprised. In fact, he told Will that he sees that type of response from mainline liberal pastors all the time. “They are amazed when God wins,” Wallis said and then went on to say they are: “Scared to death that Easter just might, after all, be true.”

It might seem out of place to mention Easter today. Especially since we haven’t even started the season of Lent yet. We are still in the Church season of Epiphany, a time that is supposed to be about lights shining in the night, insights and discoveries of who Jesus is. Easter is still a season and a half away. But here is the thing about Easter, it’s a lot like Jesus, it can’t be kept relegated to just one time and place. It’s much too wild and free in the same way the Holy Spirit is much too wild and free to stay contained in a few weeks of the year. Easter – that is the Resurrection – isn’t just a season or doctrine or even a celebration of the church. It the lens through which we see and understand who Jesus really is and is the path we followers of Jesus are to traverse. Take the Gospels, for example. The Gospels in the Bible were written a long time after the events they describe actually happened. No one was recording the events as they

occurred. But people remembered them. After Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, people remembered the ways they had met Jesus, the things he did and said in a new light: the light of the resurrection. And that is how the authors of the Gospels chose to write their Gospels: through the light of the resurrection.

That brings us to the part of Luke's Gospel we just heard this morning. This is a rich account. There's a lot of life in it. Starting with Jesus and a large crowd eager to hear the word of God, and Jesus seemed happy to oblige them. Personally, I like the part of this account where Jesus was able to assess the resources available to him to create a natural sound amplifier by using one of Simon's boats to go out onto the water. Those of you who are familiar with the ways of water already know sound travels better over still or calm water. I like the part where Jesus gets into Simon's boat and tells him to push the boat into the water and Simon just does it. He doesn't ask questions. He doesn't complain. He doesn't tell Jesus he is much too busy cleaning his nets. He just did it. Then Simon went back to those nets.

And Jesus seems to have a problem with Simon giving his attention to his nets. Because when Jesus was done speaking, he once again told Simon what to do. He told Simon to take his boat out to the deep part of the lake and cast his nets. Right there in broad daylight, when any fisherman in that place worth his salt could tell anyone it won't be worth the effort. Conditions were only good at night for catching fish in that place. Everyone knew that. That's just how it worked. Don't you just love it when someone who doesn't have the experience you do or the education you do tells you what to do? Especially when it is something ridiculous and you have to explain to them why their idea won't work?

I imagine that is why Simon responded by telling Jesus – who was NOT a fisherman -- that he had been fishing all night, he had done everything right, and had caught nothing. Yet despite Jesus not being a fisherman and giving what all would agree was bad direction, Simon agreed to do as Jesus said. Notice that he called Jesus "Master". This term is probably most likely not indicative of slavery, where Simon had no choice. Instead, that word can be translated "boss" or "supervisor". While Simon might be acting sarcastic, some scholars and commentators like to point out it could mean Simon was aware of the miracles Jesus had done prior to this part of the Gospel. In fact, just before this account, Jesus had healed Simon's mother-in-law and the term could indicate Simon's recognition of Jesus as a healer and teacher and is someone he wants to obey because he believes Jesus is important. But maybe that isn't the relationship Jesus wants from Simon.

This is where the whole Easter/Resurrection starts to sneak into this account. Jesus isn't just a wise man or a miracle worker, Jesus is something else. And he didn't come so that people could listen to him or watch him while they stayed enslaved to a

system of their creation that profits from keeping people stuck in fear; fear of not having enough or being enough, fear of death, or worse, fear that there might be another way but makes the unknown far scarier than that which is already known. Jesus came to bring us resurrection life, so that we can live that resurrection life with him. And that is what he was about to show Simon.

So Simon did what Jesus said. He loaded his newly cleaned nets into his boat, and went to the deeper water, threw his nets into the water and experienced what no one expected: extravagant abundance. Abundance so extravagant it ripped nets and nearly sank not one but two boats. It was fish, fish, and more fish. So many fish you and I probably can't imagine what it looked like. Simon and his fishermen went from having no fish to literally drowning in fish. All because of Jesus. As one preacher said, "Jesus is not just master of the Word of God, he is also master of fish."

But he isn't Simon's master anymore. In the midst of all that extravagant abundance, something changed for Simon. Like our reading from the Old Testament and Paul's letter to the Corinthians from this morning, Simon's first response to all this unbelievable extravagance was to realize his own unworthiness, his own sinfulness. His brokenness. His insistence on clinging to and participating in the system that proclaims this is all there is and when it ends, that's it. Because he saw himself this way, he told Jesus, who he now called Lord, to go away.

Simon must have felt out of his element. The professional fisherman had been out-fished by someone with no experience or knowledge. Which means Jesus is no normal man. Jesus is someone who has come to break all those old expectations and break open a new way of being. This is the stuff of resurrection. And it seems to have scared Simon. Like the new life in the churches in some inner-city scared pastors of other churches.

And the really beautiful part of it is Jesus did not say one word about Simon's sinfulness. He didn't forgive him. He didn't tell him not to sin anymore. He didn't even say that it didn't matter. Instead, Jesus told Simon to not be afraid.

This is the same message given at Jesus' resurrection: to not be afraid. We might wonder why the resurrection, as Jim Wallis observed, seems to inspire fear instead of hope. Is it because it is something we cannot control? Is it because it is something that is of God and not our own intelligence or creativity? Is it because it turns everything we have studied or experienced and know with such certainty into something we can't quite see or understand? I'm sorry I don't have an answer to that question. I suspect it is one of those questions we have to live into, as Rainer Maria Rilke wrote in his famous *Letters to a Young Poet*, and discover ourselves eventually living the answer.

My favorite part of this Gospel account is the last part, when Jesus and Simon and the other fishermen get the boats to shore, all loaded and dripping with unimaginable amounts of fish, and they left everything: the boats, the nets, and all those fish and followed Jesus deeper into his ministry, his life, his death, his resurrection and ascension.

It's my favorite because I find this part of the Gospel the most confusing and wasteful. I mean, we were talking enormously large numbers of fish only a second ago. Through the lens of our 21st Century Western culture, the most important part of the story is obviously all those fish. That is what success is. That is what matters. That is what winning looks like. So why would Simon just walk away from the large numbers of fish? Surely, they first cleaned the fish and took them to market and sold them for lots of money so Simon's business was set before he left it all and followed Jesus. But that's not in the Gospel. Because Luke's Gospel wasn't written through the lens of our 21st century value of consumerism. It was written through the lens of the resurrection. So maybe the point of this account isn't the unimaginably huge number of fish. Maybe it is about Jesus who showed Simon resurrection life by taking him to deep waters when Simon believed there was nothing to be caught that day.

Resurrection is what is on the other side of fear and emptiness and loss and death and is at the same time the calling to go where Jesus goes; to the places both physical and spiritual that might not be as familiar as the what we know but can open our eyes to a new way of seeing. It reminds me of something our bishop said when he visited us last year. He commended us for joining him in trying a new type of ministry through the coffee shop, and said he was proud of us for "going deeper" into our mission and our community. We are going into something we do not know; something we are not as practiced at like our older ministries. Some of us might find that exciting. Some might think we are not worthy. Some might even be afraid: afraid of failing, or afraid of losing something. Some might be afraid or worried or disappointed because we do not have the numbers of customers like the numbers of fish in today's Gospel. But maybe the point of the Gospel wasn't the number of fish. Maybe the point is what is on the other side of fear: the resurrection life of Jesus. Maybe the point is not to know what the coffee shop has to look like, maybe the point is to go deeper with Jesus into this ministry, like we have with all our ministries at one point in the past. Because maybe what we will come closer to is the Risen Christ who is calling us all to the other side of fear.