

Luke 5:1-11, NRSV

*A Reading from the Gospel according to Luke*

*Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.*

*He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.*

*When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.*

*But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.*

First of all, a huge welcome to our new members! Whatever your journey to this moment, we are so glad you're here. You have made a commitment to relationship with God this morning just as Simon Peter and his partners did, but you also made a commitment to exploring your faith with us in this church community, and for that we are so grateful. Again, whatever brought you to this place, we want you to know you belong.

It makes a difference that we know that we belong to God. It also makes a difference that we know we belong to each other. Let me tell you if you are new, or in a time of renewal (and I think most of us are) that you have come to a good place, a place where you can shift your burdens a little, whatever they may be, because others are willing to help you carry them. Here it is our hope that you will be strengthened by the love of God, that you'll be offered solace when you need it, and given the opportunity to find purpose and a sense of belonging.

### **My Teacher**

We all have our stories of being the outsider and finding a home. My first happened to me fairly early on in life. In 1972 when I was eight, my family moved to Lennoxville Quebec, from our home in a fishing village in Ghana, West Africa. We had been living there since I was four, and prior to that had lived in BC. So at eight years old I really

had almost no sense of connection to Canada, and certainly didn't speak a word of French. Nobody in my family did back then!

The transition wasn't easy for me despite my very loving family. I was brutally homesick and there were a lot of tears that year. As winter arrived, I hated the cold. I hated the dark. I hated that our house was so big compared to our little two-bedroom bungalow in Ghana. I only got to share a room with one sibling instead of three. I missed my friends. I missed the earth, because paved roads and sidewalks, let alone snow, were so foreign. I do not know how refugee children manage, because here I was, a Canadian child with Canadian parents, and the move was so difficult.

Now my parents thought it would be great, seeing as we were living in Quebec, to put me and my little sister into a French school. And it was – I'm so grateful that I learned French that way! What they didn't realize though, was that I had no concept of Canadian school. I think they just assumed we would know about school, even though our schooling in Ghana had consisted of my mother and others teaching us and a mixed group of about 30 expatriate and Ghanaian children in our various homes, and after a year or so in a small, rented building in the mornings when they could get it.

So everything was new about my French school in Quebec. I had never sat at a desk. I had never had so many children around me (there were 36 students in my grade 3 class in Quebec). I didn't know about raising your hand or bells. And I didn't know that we were supposed to stay there all day. I ate my lunch at the first recess and waited for my parents to come get me at the actual lunch hour — and I remember the horror I felt when I realized that we weren't finished!

On top of that, of course, I couldn't speak a word of French. Now my teacher, Denise (and we called our teachers by their first names), could not speak a word of English. This was 1972, two years after the October crisis, so divisions between French and English were pretty deep. So I have no idea what my teacher Denise said to me that first day, or for many days after!

Despite this, I learned a lot that year, including a whole new language. But I do not remember a single lesson she taught. I do not know what the curriculum was, or what my homework consisted of. But I do remember the way she made sure I was included, and even learned foreign games — like dodgeball! I do remember the smile she gave me every day, and the way she made me feel when I entered the classroom. Even on the first day, I remember sitting at my desk while she raised and lowered my hand to show me what to do when I wanted to ask to go to the bathroom or say something. (I think I had already wandered out of the class once!) I don't know what Denise actually said, but I know she smiled. She told me with her body language that I mattered, that I belonged, and that I was welcome in her class.

I hope that's how you feel when you enter this building. Belonging matters. It matters to us on a personal level, because loneliness is a deadly virus. It matters to the world because we are stronger when we work together. And it matters to God, because God loves ALL of us.

## Gospel

Jesus believed in the power of belonging. People and relationships mattered to him. Everywhere he went, he gathered people around him. He needed to, not only because nobody works, lives, or loves alone, but also because he had a message so big and so wonderful it could not be contained.

Sometimes when people join a Church, they think that they will find God there. But understand, it's not quite like that. When we join a good Church, we find God within ourselves.

If you're new — and I'm not just talking to the new members — you may still feel a little uncertain of your place. But notice in the passage this morning, who is the newcomer? It's not the fishermen. The fishermen all know each other. They're described as 'partners'. They're a community. *It's Jesus who is the newcomer!* Look how he changes things by the end of the passage. So to those who are new here, we thank you in advance for the ways you will help us understand God at a different level. May we always do the same for each other!

Not only is Jesus the newcomer, but at the start of the passage he's the one with the problem. It's one I think we can all relate to, because it starts with Jesus feeling overwhelmed. The crowd, as the scripture passage says, is '*pressing in on him*'. The usual way of doing things, preaching from the shore all by himself, isn't working. He has a problem, a burden. So what does he do?

He stops trying to do it on his own. He reaches out to someone who looks trustworthy and who is obviously hard-working. It's a fisherman mending his nets by the water after a frustrating and empty night of fishing. And Jesus asks for help. This isn't a one-off occurrence for Jesus. He, in fact, often asks for help. He asks the Samaritan woman for a drink. He asks Zacchaeus for a meal. Jesus draws us into offering HOSPITALITY to each other, which allows us to forge meaningful relationships and belonging. "Whatsoever we do..."

Today he asks us to continue to spread his message and practice of love in the world.

And here's the thing — those fishermen say "Yes!" It's a moment of decision for them, because how tired and discouraged they must be after their fruitless long night. We've been there, haven't we? But they do what Jesus asks. I imagine the three of them (because we know from the other gospels that Simon Peter's brother Andrew is there too) rowing out and getting to know each other. Jesus is probably asking them about fishing, or about their families. They may be asking why he gave up his father's trade of carpentry. Who knows? But a bond begins to form, a relationship, a friendship.

Compassionate, open conversation moves us towards understanding, and ultimately God. When we reach out to each other, we reach out to God. God is there in the hospitality, the offering of ourselves. As I said before, God lives with us in our loving relationships.

## Abundance

When Jesus has finished his preaching, he's grateful and he tells his new friends to throw those nets back over into the deep. They protest. There are no fish, as evidenced by their long empty night. But he insists — "Throw those nets into the deep!" he says — *de profundis!* And I imagine they roll their eyes a bit, because *what does a carpenter turned preacher know about fishing?* But they do it. And oh, how abundant their catch becomes! At that moment, Peter recognizes he is in the presence of God. He also recognizes his own perfection. But Jesus doesn't care. God loves all.

The abundance of fish they have just caught is a sign of the many people who will come forward and make the same decision they did, the same decision that our new members made today, to be part of this particular group, to accept an invitation to belong here within this kinship of Christ.

But those fish are also a sign of the abundance that is given to us personally when we choose to follow Christ. If you fish, you know what joy there is in a good catch. Imagine something like this! We are called in our faith to go deep, to go forward, often blindly, trusting that goodness, peace, belonging and abundance will be not only ours, but will be the world's if we follow Christ's call to love our God and love our neighbour as ourself.

This is what God wants, not just for us, but for the whole world, that each person should know that they are loved abundantly, and that we should have abundantly the things we need for a good life. I don't mean you're going to get rich by embracing Christ. (Sorry! No prosperity gospel here!) I mean you're going to find joy and belonging and love — because at the heart of Christ's message is a call to love and belonging, and those two ultimately — even within the repeated challenges of life — lead to joy. It's what God wants for everyone.

## INJUSTICE

This is why our hearts break when we see people struggling under the oppression of injustice, poverty, exclusion, racism, illness or war. We know that God calls always and everywhere for justice. *Injustice is, after all, just a betrayal of belonging.* Injustice is based on the idea that some are less deserving than others, that some aren't quite as equal as others, that some don't really belong. Think for instance of whose deaths make the front page? And whose don't? Whose names are worth printing, and who is just a statistic? Think of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous women.

So when we follow Jesus we commit to a transformative vision of the kingdom where all belong. But we know that we cannot work effectively for the Kingdom of God without having a sense of community.

How do we work for the kingdom? By following in the footsteps of Jesus, who Brian McLaren reminds us was always '*a source of positive disruption*'. Surrounded by the love of the Holy Spirit and open to the grace of our God, that disruption should always lead us to greater love, greater justice, greater compassion, greater faith, and a greater sense of belonging.

If you're new and want to get involved in some of the works of justice, peace, or spirituality that are happening here — and there's a lot to choose from — please know you are most welcome. But know that you're also enough just as you are. If this is a restful time for you or a time of learning, grieving or healing, that's okay too. It's enough that you are here.

## KINSHIP

I said Kingdom of God a moment ago, but some theologians prefer to refer to the 'Kingdom' of God because the word 'Kin' or kinship captures so well this idea that we are here for each other, each of us reaching out both to those within this community and also to the larger world community. Theologian Brian MacLaren says that kinship (using the older gendered term 'fellowship'):

*“is a kind of belonging that isn't based on status, achievement, or gender, but instead is based on a deep belief that everyone matters, everyone is welcome, and everyone is loved, no conditions, no exceptions. It's not the kind of belonging you find at the top of the ladder among those who think they are the best, but at the bottom among all the rest.”*

Kinship both prizes the uniqueness of each person while also calling us to a common goal of loving neighbour and God. As we seek a transformation toward justice and peace in the world, we also concern ourselves belonging within this church. Our spirituality and our actions need to be deeply enmeshed.

Kinship reminds me of the old blessing that goes: *'May you have roots and wings!'* We root ourselves in the teachings of Christ, in prayer, tradition and a sense of God's loving presence so that we can fly. Without being rooted in a community we will fly madly off in all directions, trying to do alone the things that require a group. But if we do not fly, roots on their own will do nothing but drag us down, down, down into a stagnating darkness that stifles individual creativity out of a fear of being too different to belong. So go ahead — be different!

## CHANGE/TRANSFORMATION

Embracing a sense of kinship also helps us as we discern our way forward as a community. Change may come because of the shifting circumstances of our world, but we are also changed by the people who walk through our door. This Church is not the same one it was yesterday because we have new members in it.

We are a community, but we are always leaving what we know, as the fishermen did, and venturing somewhere new, following Jesus. We do it over and over again. Isn't that just life? We remember the past, but we move into the future, striving to leave behind our fears, judgements, vanity and hurt. Last January Pastor Kim reminded us not to try to drag our boats behind us. I love that image! Let them go and walk in the company of the disciples.

While Jesus takes his new disciples and all of us today on a journey into the unknown, he calls us to treasure each other, each with our unique identities and gifts, for our time

together is always too short. Jesus himself is only with his disciples physically for three years ... but his impact is for eternity. The impact of each person here too is forever. Think of the many people who have shaped this community that we love and have passed on to the arms of God. They are still here. They are not forgotten.

## CONCLUSION

This reminder of how even a short time with someone can leave a lasting impact was brought home to me a few years ago. I was sitting at my computer, trying to write something about gratitude because Thanksgiving was coming up. I got to thinking about who I was grateful for beyond my family and immediate friends. And I thought of Denise, my teacher, and I said to myself as I idly tapped on my keyboard, if only there was some way to find out whatever happened to her. Well, duh! I suddenly remembered the internet and I googled her name.

In an instant, there she was! She had her own website.

Of course, she'd gone on to write numerous books for children as well as inspirational non-fiction for adults. She had been a volunteer teacher in Senegal. She followed her faith. She gave talks, she taught at the university, and she had that same kind, welcoming smile that I remembered. So, I pressed on her nose, because that was how you entered her site back then. And I found the 'contact' page. And using my very best French I wrote her a short message. I said: *'You probably don't remember me, but in 1972-1973 you taught me grade 3. I had just arrived from Ghana, and I didn't speak any English but you made me feel so welcome, and have inspired me in my own work as a teacher and chaplain. I just wanted to reach out to say thank you so much for your kindness and welcome so many years ago.'*

And I sent off the message and got back to work. I didn't expect to hear back from her really. Well, it took less than ten minutes! My email dinged, and there it was, a message from Denise. And she said:

*"Oh Catherine, I remember you. I have wondered over the years what happened to you. I am so happy you are doing well. You have given me such a ray of sunshine today by reaching out. It is I that thank you."*

So here's the thing. After about 45 years, the teacher who once made me feel like I mattered and that I belonged *still* took the time so many years later to give me the same message.! So if it's been awhile since anyone has said it to you, let me say it now. You matter. You belong. And let me go further — You are loved! AMEN