A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Going Deep into Truth and Trust

Luke 5

February 9, 2025

Jesus tells empty-handed fishermen, after a long night of empty nets, "Put out into the deep water." The deep water.

The deep water of the Sea of Galilee was deep enough to be a spot of opportunity—that's where the big fish may be, and a pretext for danger—the deep water, the darkness deep down where your little boat stands little chance against swift, sudden storms or the unknown. What can rise to the surface when you go down deep? Something terrible? Something beautiful? Something that can change your life.

Put out into the deep water. The deep water, the *bathos*, is connected to the old word used for the chaos that the vast expanse of the wildest seas represented. To put out there requires courage for what is above the water and for Leviathan, down deep below both in the water and in yourself.

In giving this charge: search down deep, to Simon Peter, Jesus gives it to the church. The first readers of Luke's gospel would have known, just as we remember, that Peter became the leader of the disciples, the first apostle among equals; he is the rock on which Jesus will build his church. When Peter is invoked in the gospel story, the writer knows that readers will read Peter as the theological emblem of the church of which they are a part.

"Peter, put out to deep water." It's a charge to the church. Don't be afraid. Go deeper. Risk bigger. Hope more. Try again, even after failure. Let down your nets into the deep, where you cannot see, into the mystery, and then know it is down there that you may meet yourself coming back up into the light. And you might catch some fish.

The nets strained; they almost broke. It took another boat full of men to haul them in. It took other boats, now laden with the haul to hold all that rose from the depths. Any other time, this would be the highlight of a professional fisherman's career that he would brag about for the rest of his life. On this morning, after a long night of nothing, it was also a grand reversal of their failure. On this day, it was even more because it was him… him—the preacher on the boat with them, the one who said, "Put out one more time." This was him who did… this. Whatever this is, this is different.

And terrifying.

It wasn't only fish that were drawn from the depths into the light. It was something deep down within Simon Peter himself that was drawn up and drawn out of him. He fell to the knees of Jesus and said, "I am a sinful man. Go away from me."

This is the first time in Luke's gospel that anyone is called a sinful person. In Luke's gospel, 18 times, more than anywhere else, someone or someones are called sinner or sinners: several times the infamous duo of "tax-collectors and sinners" with whom Jesus is accused of cavorting. 18 times. Peter is the first. And of all of those, Peter is the only one who accuses himself of being a sinner. Why would he do that?

Why would anyone? We might avoid it in caution of the possibility that sin language can be toxic. Sin-language can be wielded as a weapon to bludgeon others or self. Besides, it feels "judgy," and wouldn't it be better to talk about "mistakes" or "errors of judgment" or "feelings of inadequacy"? More often, perhaps, we might just think of ourselves as basically good people. Those other guys, those are the ones who need to get right and come to Jesus. But I'm a sinner? It feels so old-fashioned. Isn't that language we've set aside for those who are spiritually enlightened? All of this may be what Stanley Hauerwas had in mind when he would say, "Sin is a theological achievement." Confession of sin is a spiritual triumph.

Here is Simon Peter, the emblem of the apostles, in a boat, the sign of the church, as a fisherman, a metaphor for the essential activity of the church, in his first decisive act of response to Jesus on his knees, an act of worship, and the first words from his mouth are, "I'm a sinful person". Theological achievement? Spiritual triumph?

Had he done something wrong? Maybe. He's a fisherman. We don't get many details in the story, so maybe he had done something, thought something, said something unbecoming of the rock on which the church is built, and now he's sorry he did. Recognition of "I'm a sinner" and its confession can begin from a place of guilt or shame. When we feel that, when we know we've done wrong, we confess, as specifically as possible—this is what I've done. And it's wrong. Help me, Lord, to change. Help me make it right.

A failure--especially a big failure--is the most obvious way a person discovers they are a sinner. It's not the only way. Another entry is from becoming more aware of the fallenness of the world. We can become more aware of society's failures and mediocrities, dwell on horrible events and find a connection between the world's troubles and our own hearts. Isaiah when encountering the living God says, "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips."

We mature as we become aware of the cultural, systemic, even planetary injustices, malformations, degradations in which we take part just by existing. They are hard to break free from, but hard to ignore once you have eyes to see. We become aware of our individual participation in a broken world, and we feel it deeper and desire for a change, which feels like it extends even beyond us. But to confess is to begin to address it.

Yet there is a hazard in consuming copious information about the fallenness of the world and the fix that it's in--that the accusation points outward and never inward. It's quite easy, we find, to fall into a pattern of anger, disgust, judgment toward others. A warped version of

Isaiah would be “I’m a man of unclean lips, but you should see those other guys.” Isn’t that where we sort of live? Political discourse in this moment in time is the Super Bowl of accusations of others’ failures and wicked actions and motivations behind them. As you likely well know, media that begs to be consumed and begs for hot takes to fill it is a cauldron of hot lava of anger. I’m definitely not saying all anger toward others is unjustified. But in this context, let us also consider the example of Peter. In the moment of crisis, he doesn’t say, “Look how rotten all those people are over there.” He is humble about himself, introspective even, which is not a thing you normally associate with Peter, if you know his story. And, spoiler: he will join the Lord in a ministry of redemption for all those other people, including those who cause the Lord, and others, and himself tremendous suffering. “I am a sinner” is also prelude to “I will follow you wherever you lead.”

A third way we discover ourselves as sinners is the thought of our mortality. Peter’s boat in the middle of the lake was sinking, which must be terrifying. As we grow older and become aware of the essential limitation of this human life, we can become reflective. Spiritual maturing can engender a thoughtful setting of priorities. “It should help us to order our lives, so we minimize harm, quickly seek people’s forgiveness, and try to let go of their offenses against us.” (*How to Be a Sinner*, 35). As we mature, we become introspective. Some of the sharp edges are smoothed out. We become more able to offer and to receive forgiveness.

We can discover we are sinners when we confront a failure or wrong we have done. “I have done wrong—I am a sinful person. Help me make right the hurt I have done.” We can discover we are sinners when we see our part in a world in tatters, “I am humble before you, Lord. Help me serve with you and serve you for the redemption of all things.” We can discover we are sinners when we face the end of life and confront its reality in humility, “My life is but a breath. Let me live with you, Lord. Let your life become mine.”

For Simon Peter, it was some combination of all of those. And for him, it was something else. Above all else, this moment was prompted by an overwhelming encounter with light and goodness, with divine power and glory. People or places that are pure, transparent, holy can simultaneously inspire and expose us. But that exposure is experienced as a form of freedom that leads to joy.

The 20th century poet W.H. Auden described his friend Charles Williams in just this way. Williams was the lesser known of “The Inklings”. Sure, everyone knows CS Lewis and his Aslan in Narnia, and Tolkien and his Frodo in the Shire, but it was Williams who was light and inspiration just in his being. About him, Auden wrote: “I had met many good people before who made me ashamed of my own shortcomings, but in the presence of this man… I did not feel ashamed. I felt transformed into a person who was incapable of doing or thinking anything base or unloving.” (quoted in Bouteneff, 30). Williams was instrumental in Auden’s journey to Christian faith.

Exposure to someone who is really true, really good, genuine, beautiful—or to someone who loves us completely to the core of our being can be both a transformative and terrifying experience—because it's so rare, yes, and because it's about as close as we get to the face of God. And it makes us want to change. I've had people in my life about whom I decided: I want to be like them. I want what they've got. I'm not that way now, and I see the gap--but I want to be.

Jack Nicholson said to Helen Hunt in the movie, *As Good as It Gets*, "You make me want to be a better man." And he started taking steps to be such a better man. He had a long way to go. Maybe we all do. Confession is the first decisive step that unleashes the possibilities. A theological achievement. A spiritual triumph because it believes there is hope, even for me, even for us, even for the world, all because of the One before whom I am standing.

What we have learned to say at the first and all through life, is, "Lord, have mercy upon me." This is the essence of the simple prayer sometimes called the Jesus prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." This prayer is a prayer of truth and a prayer of trust. We tell the truth of ourselves to the one whom we trust for mercy. Truth and trust.

Peter at this moment has truth but not yet trust. "I'm a sinner," he says, and not "Lord, have mercy, but, "Lord, go away." They're in a boat in the middle of the lake. Where is he supposed to go? There's been no walking on water yet to this point. But Peter just wants him away.

At this moment, he knows a God of power, but not the God of mercy. He knows the God of righteousness, but not yet the God of grace. He knows the God who is Lord of land and sea, and all that is within it, but not the God whose eye is on the sparrow and who knows and loves each creature with precious care.

He knows fear, but not yet faith. He feels awe, but not yet wonder at the tender, transformative mercies of God. But he will.

"Do not be afraid," Jesus says.

Perhaps he only meant, "Do not be afraid of the boat sinking—I've got this." Perhaps. But it sure seems like something much more is going on here. Don't be afraid when you're sinking in the deep water. There is deep grace for those sinking in deep water.

When I was sinking, far from the peaceful shore.
The Master of the Sea was there.
Love lifted me.
When I was sinking deep, love lifted me.

A word to Peter, a word to the church, word to each of us: do not be afraid to go deep. Christ is there. He's already gone down--deep down. Buried to rise again. We learn to pray on our knees with the psalmist:

> *Where can I go from your presence?*
> *If I rise to the heavens, you are there.*
> *If I go down to the abyss, you are there.*
> *If I settle on the far side of the sea, even there, you are…*

When I am empty…
When I am burdened…
When I am overwhelmed…
When I've failed…
When all the world is falling apart…
My eyes are on you—you are all that I see.

You are with me, even me, even now. Saving, redeeming. Your love lifts me up.

Now, let's go fish for others drowning in the deep-down darkness that all things may rise to the light of God. Amen.