

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

4 February 2007

Isaiah 6:1-8

Luke 5:1-11

There are a couple of our long time members, well respected leaders – I would have said mature and responsible role models, but now I'm not so sure – who in a couple of hours are going to take a plunge. True, one of our up and coming young attorneys did the same thing on New Year's Day, but you know what they say about attorneys. Can you tell me what would possess anyone in their right minds – and maybe that's the clue right there – right minds – to plunge into the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of New Hampshire on February 4? To say nothing of New Year's Day? I know sane folks who wouldn't do such a ridiculous thing on the 1st of August. My own personal approach is to avoid both the Atlantic Ocean and anything resembling a plunge – anytime. I'm the ease your toes in one at a time on a really hot day when you have to cool off sort of water person. I'm the sort of person who went sailing on Lake Champlain for a week in October and decided a sponge bath was enough, and a pail of water over the head - but only the head – was almost tolerable in order to have clean hair. Let me tell you, under those conditions, you don't need to wash your hair every day. I'm probably not the best person to be trying to explain to you why these two wise women, one of them zeroing in on 50, the other moving steadily toward 60 are taking the penguin plunge at noon today. Ludicrous! Absolutely ludicrous! They would say it's to raise money for Special Olympics; the January attorney plunger was focused on Juvenile Diabetes. Bill would sum that all up by saying it's for the children. But I've got to tell you, I just shake my head and marvel. Pledge to support the children, yes. Pledge to support their lunacy, maybe. Pledge, yes. Plunge, never.

All of that was really clear and obvious and settled, case closed, conversation over until I read this morning's Gospel lesson. And thought about the piece the choir is going to sing as soon as I get done. And now I have to wonder. Is the measured, thoroughly researched, carefully calculated, intentional, deliberate, absolutely logical approach always the most faithful? Or are we sometimes called to throw caution to the wind, maybe even reason and sanity along with it, and just go for it? If so, just what sort of things might be reason enough to climb way out there on a limb, abandon normalcy and predictability and the way we've always done it, in order to embrace the new and unknown and unprecedented?

Simon and James and John were fishermen. They'd been at it all night, throwing the net over the side of the boat, hauling it back in – empty. Row a little, change the angle of the boat, watch for signs and signals, throw the net over the side of the boat, haul it back in, pick out the sea weed and lake bottom clutter, throw the net back in. They'd been up all night and they had nothing to show for it. They were tired, they were hungry, they were cold, they were concerned. This wasn't the first night they hadn't caught anything, you know, and they had bills to pay, hungry mouths

to feed, people depending on them. They'd stayed out on the water longer than usual, hoping against hope that they wouldn't have to go home empty handed. But finally they gave up, came ashore and started to wash up. And who should wander up the side of the lake but carpenter Jesus and the crowd that had been accumulating for the past several days. Simon wasn't exactly impressed when the man asked him to row him out onto the lake, but he could see that the crowd was relentless, so he agreed. Then the man began to teach, and I can imagine Simon feeling some complicated mixture of fascination with the words and truth of his teachings – yet irritated frustration that the nets still weren't clean, he still hadn't had breakfast, and he desperately needed to go to sleep. Then Jesus looked at him and told him to put the nets out into deep water. Now, it's hard to know what Simon said to Jesus, if anything, but I can imagine that if he'd said what was on his mind it would have sounded something like, look, I've been at this all night, and the fish just aren't here, and if you were a fisherman, you'd know that this net works at night, but it's not daytime fishing equipment. Even fish are too smart to get caught up in this mess in the daytime. Can I please just go home now? Whether or not Simon said any of that, we don't know. What we do know is that he protested a little, and then he did as Jesus said. And they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break and the boats were filled to overflowing and headed down from the weight and splash of all those flapping fish. And when they finally got to shore, Jesus said, don't be afraid; from now on you will be catching people. At which point, they left it all behind – fish, boats, family, everything – and set off to follow Jesus.

Sounds about as ludicrous and unreasonable as plunging into the Atlantic Ocean on the 4th of February, but sometimes that's precisely what the life of faith calls for. We like to keep it neat and orderly and carefully calculated and conservatively measured, and Jesus walks in and invites us out into deep water. Take a plunge! Follow me! Or as Thomas Long wrote about a different text in a different gospel:

Jesus spoke solemnly and urgently to his disciples about the kingdom of heaven, but they thought he was talking about lunch. Jesus' message is always urgent and life-giving, always beckoning his followers to step out of the safety of conventional compromise and into the wind-blown adventure of faith, to the thrill of self-denial, to the possibility of bearing a cross and saving one's life by losing it for Christ's sake; but his passionate call is often trivialized into an invitation to join a religious club that meets for tea and conversation on Sundays.
(page 182, *Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion*, © 1997)

We do meet for tea and conversation on Sunday, but hopefully we do more than that, and hopefully we're more than a religious club. What do you suppose the urgent, life-giving message is that Jesus wants us to hear this morning? Assuming he's calling us to step out of the safety of conventional compromise and into the wind-blown adventure of faith, and I do assume that, what do you think that means? What form of risk is God asking us to embrace – individually as well as a community? What deep water does Jesus want us to get in to today? What's the harvest that awaits us if we dare to venture out?

I'd like to share a poem Maren Tirabassi has written about this text:

Life-changing God,
you who walk with us before you call us –
willingly we crowd around you to listen to your word,
eagerly we press too close to you,

wading out to be taught, to be healed,
hungrily we seek to understand you –
your mission and your presence.

Feed us, Savior, we have worked hard all week long
and caught nothing to change us.

Speak to us on the shore,
plainly, in images familiar to our daily work.
Help us in our lives and our relationships;
with the fears and the frailty and the fatigue.
Mend our nets of understanding,
for they are all torn.

But what is this rowing that you ask us to do –
to put out into deep waters
and let down our nets again?
What would you have us catch /
Something that we cannot bring in
without community, without friends.

Gentle One, leave us – you ask too much of ordinary lives.

But if you say so
and you are not afraid for us
and take us where we need not be afraid –
and bring us back –
caught at last in your life-changing net
at last ready to finish the work of your hands –
the boat-borrowing, net-sewing,
soul-fishing work of your hands.

Then we will leave the ordinary –
we will leave everything ordinary and safe –
we will leave into your calling,
your changing, your grace. Amen. (pages 46-47, *An Improbable Gift of Blessing*)

I'm not at all convinced I see a penguin plunge into the Atlantic Ocean in my afternoon, but I do suspect there's a plunge out there waiting for me. What about you?