**Called to a New Thing**

**Narrative Lectionary**

**January 29, 2016**

Luke 5: 1-11 Russell Mitchell-Walker

This week I held an introduction to Faith Exploration, providing opportunity for folk to learn what the program is about. It is a program to learn about the United Church of Canada and what we believe. It is a program to provide opportunity for the participants to discern what they believe. It is a program about experiencing other faiths and walking together to learn how to be faithful followers of Jesus. We have four people interested in this program and I expect a few more – we will start Feb 8 and I welcome more participants. They will also be looking for folk to walk with them as Spiritual Companions so let me know if you are open to companioning a participant in this program. These folk bring great questions and energy to learn and deepen their commitment and faith. They want to understand the differences and similarities among the churches. They want to experience community and understand our traditions. Some have never been baptised and want to be baptised. They are embarking on a journey similar to the disciples when Jesus invited them to leave their nets and follow him.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus has been gaining in popularity. So much so that when he gathers on an early morning in Galilee, he needs to borrow Simons’ boat to speak to the large crowd. Jesus doesn’t ask to borrow a strangers’ boat because Simon knows Jesus, he has just healed his mother-in-law. The three fishers, Simon, James, and John have been fishing all night, which would have been the practice, using linen nets that had to be washed afterwards and could be seen by the fish in the water in the daytime. Jesus’ suggestion to go out deeper, and put the nets out, was kind of crazy, given this and that they had already been fishing all night and caught nothing. Jesus calls us to go deeper, when our well is dry. When Simon sees the results, almost more fish than they can manage; he realizes for the second time the presence of God is with this man Jesus and is humbled and feeling unworthy. He asks Jesus to go away from him because he is a sinful man. Jesus ignores this, and tells them not to be afraid, inviting them to catch people with him.

In this moment, Jesus focuses on inviting them into this new thing he is doing, to follow him into the unknown. They leave all they have and follow him. Open to what he has for them, and where he will lead them. Can we have that kind of openness? Many believe the church or Christianity is moving into a new time. God is doing a new thing amongst us. Are we open to experiencing it? What new thing might we as Eastside United Church be called into? It can be a scary time as many may be noticing that it seems like the church is dying, fewer people are coming on Sunday mornings in most churches. Less is coming in financially. But Jesus tells us too, not to be afraid. We are called to be open to the spirit, to be open to what new ways of being church may evolve for us if we are open. We are called even though we may not feel worthy or ready, indeed, maybe in spite of or because of that. Jesus gathers simple, uneducated laborers who lived on the fringes of society, people with few discernible gifts for ministry. This is who he uses for God’s purposes of spreading the good news. It was not about converting people to be followers it was about inviting people in. How have we done at that? How many invited people to come to church today, on this come to church Sunday?

It can be a real challenge as many people are disillusioned and disheartened with the church. It is the reason the church is declining. The church has done a real disservice to many over the years. Too many when they think of church think of an institution that expect a certain type of belief or doctrine; of people who force their beliefs on others, and expect them to be born again; they think of an institution that hides sexual abuse of priests or who contributed to the violence against First Nations children in residential school; or who have rejected and caused much hurt, pain and exclusion to LGBT folk. The church has much to answer for, and we also have much educating to do about how we as a church, as a congregation are different or seeking to be different from these realities. The gospel passage talks about catching people. For too long too many in the church have violently sought to live this out, by entrapment and forceful evangelical methods. Fundamentalist and evangelical churches too often have given the word evangelical a bad name. But evangelical means good news, sharing the good news. The good news of Jesus Christ is more about justice for the poor and marginalized, standing with those who are vulnerable, challenging the systems that create poverty and injustice. This is what Jesus did. There are those who are committed to social justice and spirituality that have no idea that this is also what the church, the United Church is about. Our challenge is to discern how we reach out to these people with this message, in a way that is inviting and welcoming. It is about re-imagining what we are called to do.

In December our leadership team had a visioning meeting that included experiencing an Innovations workshop with Edge, the Network for Ministry Development. This is the organization we have applied to through the Embracing the Spirit Fund for support for our Family Ministry program, including our community Easter Egg hunt – a new thing God is doing amongst us. The workshop invited us to think outside the box of what we are doing and look to what is going on in our neighbourhood that we might support or get involved in. Or for us to look to see what needs there may be that we might help with. The need could be social or economic. There are churches who have started a café in the neighbourhood and combined it with a drop in program for youth and young adults. There are young women’s programs, arts programs, support for immigrants and refugees, all connecting with a need in the community and often not running out of the church building but others do provide needed space for a community program in their building. Is there parenting support needed here? Support for seniors? What do you know about this community? We have a new YMCA in the community and I intend to visit them and see what they have noticed as needs since they’ve opened. Our book study, The New Parish, is all about how we connect with our neighbourhood.

When Jesus asked Simon, James and John to put their boats out into the deep water, and they began to catch huge amounts of fish, Simon realized the profound nature of what had happened. Even though the boats were almost sinking, he stopped gathering the fish and turned to Jesus and fell down at Jesus’ knees. In that moment his priorities changed. He turned away from what he was doing, from his livelihood and turned toward Jesus. It was a life-altering moment. Jesus welcomed him and guided him. How much of a priority is our faith in our lives? If we are faced with a dilemma in our work or personal life that goes against our faith and moral values, what wins out? Which is the priority? Jesus asks us to put our faith in God, to trust. Indeed in the story, the family of the fishers are looked after for a while because the enormous amount of fish would provide them with an economic cushion to live off of as the three go off to follow Jesus.

There is much that challenges our Christian values and justice seeking morals these days, especially for our neighbours to the south, the US. We desperately need the kind of good news today Jesus talked about, supporting the poor, liberating the oppressed, releasing the prisoners (including those who are prisoners of ideology), recovering of sight to the blind (including those who are blind to the needs of the poor and vulnerable). William Barber is a Disciples of Christ minister in North Carolina who offers this good news to a movement that has gathered on Moral Mondays each week for a few years. Their movement has grown and now they are mobilizing around the issues being challenged by the Trump administration. Nicole Haynes and myself heard him preach at the Wild Goose Festival a few years ago and it was very powerful (Nicole said I need to preach more like him! Which is a stretch for me!!) You have probably heard of evangelical services that have altar calls – where the minister invites members of the congregation to come forward to re-commit themselves to Christ and declare Jesus as personal lord and saviour – not the kind of theology we are about here. At this worship with Rev. Barber, he had an altar call, but it was calling us to recommit ourselves to the gospel message of working for social justice. This is the kind of altar call I could respond to! To give you a sense of the call for justice and the good news we are called to proclaim, here is an invitation Rev William Barber is presently making to folk in North Carolina, but it could be for anywhere.

<https://youtu.be/KpoJDFhIGZQ>

Jesus called the fishers, and calls us to catch people. This is not a call to set out nets to trap people into coming to where we are. It is an invitation to be with people, to act for justice, and speak out against the violence we witness against other human beings. Being a follower of Jesus is less about doctrine or theology than it is about reaching out to people with grace, compassion, and love. May we be open to the new things God is doing amongst us. May we commit to following Jesus in a way that embraces, grace, compassion and love, establishing a generous and just community that respects and welcomes all, and without imposing what we believe.