

Deep Water

*Put out into deep water.* That is what Jesus said to the fishermen, those first of his apostles. And it is what he says to us, this evening, as we gather in joy to welcome your new pastor.

Now, I am here only under protest. For years, Pastor Miller has served in the Germanna Conference, where she has been a treasured colleague and a good friend. We have relied on each other, rejoiced with each other, and our kids have shared overnights together at Power in the Spirit. So I was *not* happy that you called her away from us, and I am here on behalf of all your neighbors to the north to ask – politely but firmly -- if we may have her back her back.

But no, that would be cruel. You are good people, and you deserve the best. So here she is. Our best.

And together as a congregation and a pastor I hope you will listen to our Lord as he gives instructions to his apostles: *Put out into deep water.*

In other words, don't stay long in the shallows, in the safe waters where the small fish swim. Go deep, seek the big prize.

Moby-Dick, the greatest fishing story ever told, begins with chapter after chapter of preliminaries, of introductions to whales and whalers, to the culture of Nantucket and life aboard ship, before at last in chapter 31, the storyteller says, *Already we are boldly launched upon the deep; but soon we shall be lost in its unshored, harbourless immensities.*

I love those “harbourless immensities.” But what Jesus says is different: Don’t wait thirty-one chapters. None of the Gospels even *has* that many chapters. He says, go deep from the very beginning. *Go deep*.

Of course, going deep means getting in over your head. And often, that’s what ministry feels like. Maybe you have felt it yourself, when the pastor asks you to do something you’ve never done before: read a lesson on Sunday, offer a prayer, lead a committee. Or something harder. And she will. It is her job, to push your limits, to drag you in.

And if you feel inadequate, unworthy of the call, you are in good company; that is the point of our lessons tonight.

*Holy, holy, holy*, sang the seraphim, flying around the throne of God. Don’t picture them as angels in white robes, with harps and haloes. They were, literally, fiery serpents – *flying* serpents, like dragons. God’s attendants, but unworthy to look on their master. And how much less worthy was Isaiah, a mere mortal? A man, as he said himself, of unclean lips.

“Get away from me, Lord, said St Peter, after the miraculous catch of fish. “Get away, for I am a sinful man.” He wasn’t worthy either, and he knew it.

And St Paul, the greatest missionary of all time? He says himself that he was “like one untimely born” – oh, that’s a weak translation. What he says in Greek is stronger: that he was a *miscarriage*, an *abortion*. That is how wicked he was, how unworthy to carry God’s Word. And if the prophets and the apostles were unworthy, my sisters and brothers, what about you and me?

Yet God calls us anyway. Paul says it simply: *I am not worthy to be an apostle, but by God's grace, I am what I am.* A prophet, and apostle. He was *dead*, a miscarriage, but now by grace he *lives*. And so do we.

By grace. That is to say, the gift of God that imputes to us the goodness of Christ, so that when the Father gazes at our dirty faces he sees only the radiance of the Son. This is the gift that makes ministry possible, the gift that makes new life possible.

So by grace, we set out into the deep water. Or try. But sometimes we do get stuck in the shallows.

I know a woman – one of our founding members in Warrenton. Rose is a feisty creature, even into her nineties; years ago, she was a terror. And her passion is the altar guild. She rules it with an iron fist, now as then. But years ago, she almost left the church because of ... magnolia greens.

Rose had a book about altar decoration, which instructed that there should be no flowers placed during Lent or Advent, but that in Advent magnolia greens were acceptable. So she placed them. And the new pastor didn't like it – only God knows why. But he *really* didn't. They argued. They fought. They nearly came to blows, man and woman, pastor and parishioner, there at the altar. She left the church, and did not return until he was gone.

Over magnolia greens. Over décor. Over the smallest of small fish.

I tell you this sordid story so that you will not imitate it. Because there will, inevitably, be friction as you get to know each other, pastor and people. There will

be times when you just can't figure out why Pastor Miller does things one way, when somebody else that you loved and trusted did them another. You may disagree about this or that, or something you read in the newspaper, all of which is natural – and only a problem if you make it one.

There will be sermons you don't like – there always are. But you know what? That's how it is supposed to be. If you like everything she says, that means she isn't doing her job. She's not here to make you smile and feel good about yourself; not always. She's not an entertainer, she's a pastor – a shepherd of souls.

Souls. Did you hear that word? *Souls*. Now we are into the deep water, the harbourless immensities. This is where Jesus wants us to fish – not in the shallows of magnolia greens and committee meetings, but in the depth of human need. A *soul*, after all, is the thing that makes us human. And what is a soul, to Jesus, except the broken thing he has come to fix with the awesome power of love?

And our task as followers of Christ – our task, yours and mine, not just pastors but all of us – is to be the tools God uses to heal broken souls.

Which means preaching the Word that condemns sins and forgives them, as Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, the great missionary, did. Which means, sometimes, getting into the messiness of public affairs, like Peter Muhlenberg. And means – yes, there's another Muhlenberg – being like the Episcopal priest William Augustus Muhlenberg, who built schools for orphans and rescued women from sex trafficking.

Care of souls, you see, is a Muhlenberg family tradition.

But spiritual care is often more intimate than church programs. It often looks like midnight in the neonatal ward, comforting parents whose baby is not going to survive. Or saying the Lord's Prayer to a speechless stroke victim, as tears roll down her face. Or sitting with an old man who has just lost his companion of fifty, sixty, seventy years – and doesn't need your advice, or your church program, or even your prayer. He just wants somebody to sit with him and be sad.

These are the bigger fish, the deeper waters. The church isn't supposed to be about potlucks and magnolia greens; it is supposed to be about loss and pain, longing and fulfillment, about life and death but not in that order.

And about reconciliation. About confession and forgiveness, about making broken relationships whole again. Remember Rose, who argued so bitterly with her pastor? They saw each other again, years later. And they embraced, they wept, they forgave.

Those moments are the big fish, the ones that Christians live for. That kind of reconciliation, that is the church's white whale, the elusive prize that we are always seeking on the deepest water.

So don't be scared of the deep water, the harbourless immensities. Don't be afraid to push your limits, to try new things, to face monsters and even the Devil himself. Set out together, people of Muhlenberg, Pastor Lauren – set out together, into the deep, trusting that Christ is with you. Amen.