

Change and Possibility

Isaiah 65:17-25, John 21:1-14

Center Church, Hartford

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Peter, James and John were professional fishermen before they left their nets to follow Jesus. They had years of experience fishing successfully. They had their long-used practices and rituals around the boat, as fisherfolk always do.

So, you can imagine their skepticism when someone on shore called to them "Children," (say what?) "Children, you have no fish, have you?" He's making fun of them, surely, which must have been irritating. No one likes to have a failure pointed out by a stranger. Then he has the audacity to tell them how to do their jobs. "Cast the net on the right side of the boat!" They knew all the signs in a lake to tell where the fish were, they assumed if they just threw their net out based on those signs from past experience, it would get full. But it didn't, and they couldn't see how the other side would be any better.

But with nothing to lose, one of them suggested just trying something different. I can imagine the reluctance of those pros in the boat to doing this, but they went along.

It worked. And after they realized Jesus had been their conversation partner, they understood something more than fishing technique. They understood that not all of the old ways were going to serve them as they used to. They understood that they were about to embark on something new.

Almost 18 months ago, about 60 of us gathered for a retreat at Hands on Hartford to begin a discernment process about what we as a church are called to be. We began by going to scripture to seek clues to what the church in the very beginning was called to be, and then we wondered what that might look like today. We used this scripture from John to inspire us, and we wrote some of our ideas on fish. As I remember, people got kind of excited about imagining that early church community from the descriptions in the book of Acts. And people got excited imagining how our community might look at itself in some new ways after remembering what church was called to be in the first place. We wondered what our imagined church might look, sound, feel, taste and smell like.

Around you in the pews are some of the fish we created in that first retreat. Take a few minutes and read the one nearest you, then share with others so you see a few of these fish.

I re-read all the fish this week. I remembered the energy of the room that day, and the day we also worked on our big ideas that produced our two mission priorities. As I did, I thought again of Peter and the disciples. They had had amazing days full of new ideas and energy as they traveled with Jesus. Then the bottom seemed to fall out when he died, followed by the incredible joy of Resurrection. But after that, Jesus seemed to disappear, and they fell back into their old ways. Peter said, "I'm going fishing." It was comforting for him to do what he had always done, what he knew how to do. In the midst of uncertainty and change, sometimes that feels good, to go back to what is comfortable.

Peter learned that day at the lake, however, that he could not stay there. Jesus needed him to get out there and tend the sheep. I'm sure there were days in the years that would follow that he simply wanted to chuck the whole thing and go back to fishing as he used to. Thanks be to God that if he ever did that, he did not stay in that boat.

I think about the description of that day at the lake with Jesus calling out to that boat, and I imagine several responses among those on that boat to what was happening. There were the skeptics who didn't think there was any other way to fish than what they had known for years. There were those who were not sure about all this, but decided to give it a try. Then there was Peter, who saw Jesus in the midst of this and, in joy, jumped into the water to swim to shore and celebrate his Savior and friend.

Isn't that what all change is like? We may be skeptical about anything different being good. We may be unsure but willing to give it a try. We may see the possibilities and jump with joy to live into them.

I have never given birth, but I heard an incredible speaker named Valarie Kaur at the UCC Southern New England Conference meeting a few weeks ago who has. She talked about moving into the final stage of labor which apparently is called "transition." She remembered the terrible pain and her utter certainty that she would die before she got out of this phase. But as her son was born, she realized that what feels like dying is the beginning of birth into new life. And if you have ever had a child come into your life in any way,

you know that this is the beginning of nothing ever being the same again. And, most of the time, it is utterly amazing.

Transition.

Scary, disturbing, painful, and full of exciting possibility for new life. That's kind of where we are at Center Church these days.

So, I want to take you back to that retreat 18 months ago, even if you weren't there. As I read back over all the papers I had saved, I came across one that was beautiful in its simplicity and wonderful in its sense of excitement for the future. I have no idea who wrote it, so I apologize for not giving you credit. When I asked the folk to imagine what that early church's call from God might look like today, in us. This is what someone wrote.

- "It would have tools to allow connection across traditional "borders."
- It would work with people doing social and justice work, active work, not just dollars.
- It would be a diverse community with many colors, statuses, and languages but also that had communities of common connection.
- There would be space to gather, but that space may change
- There would be teaching and sharing of stories
- There would be community and meals, like a family.
- A sense of welcome, all the time and any time
- A presence in the community, with people knowing and having a positive image of us
- Members are people who are actively engaged, giving what they can, contributing to moving the community forward."

Wow. Thank you, whoever you are.

When we began this process, Larry Roeming remarked, "We want Center Church to move forward; we're just not sure where forward is." We're still not totally sure, but I hope perhaps we are ready to throw out some nets and see what happens. Amen.