

5 Epiphany, Year C
February 4, 2007

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If you've ever tried to teach a child how to swim, you know what it's like when you first move from working with the child in the shallow end of the pool where she can stand, to working with her in the deep end. You might begin by teaching her to float. The secret is to lie back, relax, and trust. Tensing up and splashing about only makes you sink.

But when she jumps into the deep end for the first time, very often the child will paddle and flail about furiously, in a mild panic. Trusting in the shallow end is one thing, but trusting when you're in over your head is another. The deep can be scary, and often a child will prefer to stay in the shallow end where she can still touch and splash around with her friends.

Now, I'm mixing metaphors here, but hang in there with me. If you've ever done any ocean fishing, you know the difference between trolling in the safe, shallow waters of the inlet and heading out to deeper water in a boat. If you're trolling in the inlet or surfcasting from the beach, you pretty much know what you're going to find in those shallow waters – maybe some mackerel or blue fish, occasionally a bass or flounder – the results are pretty predictable. But when you set out to fish in the deep water, there's no telling what you're going to bring up.

The deep is where the bigger fish are, and it's also where the waters are much more dangerous and unpredictable. Ancient mariners were wary of sea monsters, and early maps of the known world warned that if you went too far out into the deep, you would surely perish, falling off the world into oblivion. The deep has all sorts of connotations for us.

“Put out into the deep water,” Jesus told Simon Peter, “and let down your nets for a catch. Set out for the deep, and do your work there.” They had been working all night as they always did, following the same routine, working with the usual techniques of their trade. Sometimes they were lucky, sometimes they were not. But all in all, it was a decent enough living. They got by; it was all pretty predictable; they did alright for themselves as fishermen.

But Jesus called them to something greater. He called them out of the shallow water to the deep, out of their routine with its fairly predictable results to the unknown in deeper places.

Frankly, I can't think of a better image for the whole of the Christian life, and I wonder if this Gospel story might help us to reflect on some hard questions. What does it mean, for example, to leave the shallow water for the deep? And if we are getting along pretty well in the shallow end where we can still touch, where we can remain in control, and where the results of our labors are predictable, why would we risk moving out to a place of unfathomable depths? And the hardest question of all – Are many of us in fact living out our lives in the shallow end?

All too often it seems to me that many of us approach the Christian life as if it is supposed to provide practical answers to life's day-to-day difficulties. But what if the Christian life is about moving to a deeper place where we can hardly even understand the questions? What if God is in fact an unfathomable mystery, and being a Christian is about learning to live with deeper and deeper uncertainties and learning to trust an unseen God, while we learn what it means to love each other the way Christ loved us?

I love what Lord Donald Coggan, the former archbishop of Canterbury, once said. "The church is like a swimming pool," he said. "All of the splashing goes on in the shallow end."

The fact is that Jesus urges us out to deeper water, to a deeper life, where splashing and thrashing about will only cause us to sink. In the deeper life, the only way to survive is to learn to relax and trust. And of course, this is what the life of faith is all about, learning to trust when we are in over our heads, learning how to avoid tensing up and thrashing around and trying to control everything, and instead learning to lie back and release ourselves into God's hands. "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

We see something of this same message in the Old Testament story from this morning. An angel of the Lord tells Gideon that God is with him, but Gideon answers, "If God is with us, why has all this happened to us? And where are all God's wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us?"

We know this story, don't we? A friend or family member unexpectedly dies. Spousal disagreements turn into an ugly divorce. Set-backs at the office result in pay-cuts or the loss of your job. The strange looking spot turns out to be cancer.

"If God is with us," we say with Gideon, "why has all this happened to us? And where are all God's wonderful deeds that others have told us about?"

Notice that God doesn't answer these questions that Gideon has. Maybe you've experienced a similar silence when you wanted to know where God was in the messy times of your life. Instead of answering, God just gives Gideon something to do. God tells Gideon to go and deliver Israel from Midian, to which Gideon responds that this is impossible. He is too weak. His clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and he is the least in his weak family.

And God simply says in response, "I will be with you." It's as if God is saying, "I know you can't do it; I'm going to do it for you. Trust me."

This is one of my favorite Old Testament stories. It gets even better in the next chapter, chapter 7 in the book of Judges. Gideon trusts that God will be with him, and he takes his men, all 32,000 of them, to get ready for battle against the Midianites. Now 32,000 men sounds like a lot, but the truth is that it's nothing against the Midianites who are much stronger and mightier than the forces of Gideon. But Gideon decided to do what

the Lord asked and trusted that God would take care of things. So with a mere 32,000 men, much weaker than the Midianites, he goes out for battle. It's the perfect picture of foolishness.

But just before it's time for battle, God says, "Wait a minute. If I let you go into battle with all of those men, you will be tempted to say, 'We won the victory by our own hand, by our own might.' Send 22,000 of your men home."

Amazingly, Gideon does as he's told. He sends home 22,000 of his troops, so that he's left with a mere 10,000 men. And just when he's ready to go fight again, now with very few men, God stops him again and says, "Wait a minute. There are *still* too many of you. Send all of your men home but 300. Then you'll *know* it was not *your* own doing that brought the victory." I love that story. Can you imagine the look on Gideon's face – 32,000 to 22,000 to 300? All to prove that Gideon was never in control, God was.

The message, of course, is that we can't do what God has asked us to do. Whether it's defeating the Midianites or loving our neighbor as ourselves, we can't do this on our own. We have been called into the deep end where we can no longer touch the bottom. We've been sent into deep water where the dangers are real, we're in over our heads, and we have to learn what it means to stop thrashing about, to stop taking matters into our own hands, and to remember that it is only a humble and calm trust in God that will keep us afloat and see us through.

Too much of our lives are lived in the shallow end. We parents worry more about our children's grades and college acceptances and social appearances than we worry about whether or not our children are growing up to become spiritually mature and compassionate adults. We stay in the shallow end, when spouses become experts at finding fault with each other and pointing out mistakes, instead of cherishing the deep-down goodness and beauty in the other. We stay in shallow water, when wealthy American churches spend more time and resources arguing over Biblical interpretation and who is the more orthodox, or worse, when we squabble over petty slights, while thousands of children all over the world are dying of preventable diseases and simple neglect.

This is all the splashing and thrashing about that goes on in the shallow end, where appearances are everything, where bruised egos set the agenda for relationships, and where pettiness overtakes the holy calling of the church. But we have been called to deeper water. No one can touch the bottom in these waters. No one has all the answers. The only thing that is clear in this deeper life is that loving God means that we are growing in love for our neighbor, and neglecting the poor means that we are neglecting God. Most everything else is simply noisy splashing in the shallow end. Let us push out to the deep.