

God Is In Our Boat
Sunday, February 6, 2022, 11:30 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Sally Howard

Once upon a time, long, long ago,well, actually about 15 years ago, I was a parishioner here, a mom raising her daughter at All Saints. One morning, as I picked Emma up from Sunday school in the learning center, I stopped to express my appreciation to the teachers for the wonderful gift they were giving to my daughter and the other children in the class. To my surprise, they asked me if I would be willing to attend a meeting for potential new teachers. I smiled, shook my head, and said, “no, I’m not the right person for that. I do work with children one on one in my office but I’m not really experienced with groups.” Undaunted—this wasn’t their first rodeo—the teachers encouraged me to at least go to the meeting.

Memories of my childhood Sunday school experiences ran through my mind. Their images of God and Jesus were confusing to me as a child—a God who was loving but frightening? Who was capable of sending people to torture and separation from people they loved and depended on? My father had died when I was very little, and I didn’t want to be separate from anyone I loved or depended on, especially God. God in my Sunday school was a kind of King, highly conditional in his favor, requiring purity, perfection, and sacrifice, in order to give us love and mercy in return. As one who identified as female, the message came through that I was especially responsible for purity, mine and any boy or man I loved, because my body and sensuality had damned the whole human race to begin with. Even though my image of God had changed so much as an adult, I felt unequipped to teach and empty of desire to do it.

Well, the long and the short of it is that I attended that meeting, agreed to try teaching, and fell in love with teaching Godly play. I learned so much from their wisdom and spiritual depth, and I found such joy in being able to say to them, “I am smiling at you because you are so beautiful to me and to God. God loves you so much!” There is more to that story which I will tell you later, but let me say that when I read today’s texts, I found myself in the stories.

These are the stories of God's call to Isaiah and to Simon Peter. Each story is an invitation from God to come into deeper connection, and so to become God's presence in the world for healing and justice. These are stories in which each person recognizes a new truth about themselves. God's invitations are always a glorious both/and—bringing healing and connection with God to us, and empowering transformation in the world.

Our Gospel story takes place on the lake of Gennesaret, also known as the sea of Galilee. This lake is the same site where Jesus' walked on the water, fed the 5000, and calmed the storm. It also provides the setting for many of his parables from the natural world familiar to his listeners in this region, such as seeds, fish, nets, sheep, and vineyards. In Jesus time, the shores of Galilee were not peaceful. The lake was to be renamed Tiberius, a political move by Herod to gain favor with the emperor of Rome. A taxation was imposed upon the fish caught from the sea, to maintain the empire's control. There was pain, gross economic disparity, and erasure of culture. Jesus came with compassionate brilliance, healing individuals and disturbing seats of power and structures of harm, in one movement. Such is the artistry of God.

In this unsettled and despairing fishing village, at the end of a long, sweaty day of work, Jesus engages Simon Peter. Jesus doesn't bounce into their midst, slap them on the shoulder and say, "Cheer up! Things could be worse." And Jesus doesn't name call or blame them! "Look at the bunch of crybabies and quitters! You call yourselves fishermen!" Jesus doesn't do any of the things that we sometimes do to our family, friends, or even to whole groups of people, when they are discouraged. He avoids everything that would drive them to despair. What Jesus does do is get into the boat: the arena of failure.

From the boat, he encourages Peter to cast his net again. Jesus has recently healed his mother, yet Peter is skeptical. "Trust me Jesus, nothing good is going to happen here," Peter says, "I've already tried." He drags the heavy net over the edge of the boat, and casts it deep into the

water one more time. To Peter's shock, a sign of holy abundance and a surplus of nourishment appears in the midst of the seemingly barren sea.

Peter's immediate response is fear and shame. He feels unworthy of such abundance. Faced with the profound contrast between what he feels he deserves, against the vastness of God's teeming generosity, he asks Jesus to leave him. Peter comes from a culture of purity that insisted upon the separation of bodies—the clean from the unclean, the worthy from the unworthy, those who menstruate from those who don't. There was also the separation of human from the divine—not by size or otherness, but by lack of purity and goodness. Peter could not see himself as acceptable and holy, and it took a long time before he truly understood that no body and no thing is separate from God. Ultimately he was transformed into the fisher of people, proclaiming that God's all inclusive love reaches everywhere and to every person.

It is interesting that Peter expresses his experience as sinfulness, but Jesus does not forgive his sins. Instead, he releases him from his fear and shame. Jesus knows from personal experience the human journey of deep connection to belovedness, and he calls Peter into a future immersed in the bounty of God. As Teresa of Avila once said, the love of God thaws the holy in us.

I wonder what Peter's experience might have been if his image of God had not been influenced by a culture that valued masculine images of God, dominating any other image. God as mighty in battle, the Lord whom all must serve, a forceful and coercive God if need be. If this was Peter's primary image of God, it is likely that he thought that a man should not be small and needy, strong in connection to love. The image of a breasted God, a mid-wifing God, a God whose ties of tenderness tether us no matter the storm—these images are not likely present in his mind. Until, he meets Jesus.

In Jesus, Peter begins to know in his heart that the God we most deeply want and need is the God we actually have!! The God that we fear is a God we have created, not the God who created us. God cares about all that harms us or anyone else, and goes with us in our work of dismantling all that stands against love within us and between us. God is in our boat!

The catch? We have to let go of the empty nets that we cling to. In perceived scarcity and fear, we can hang onto power for our own sake rather than giving it away and using it with each other. We are all conditioned by culture beyond our awareness. It can shackle us with norms that seem right, without recognition of the imposition and erasure our assumed norms create for those who don't look like us or who are embodied and gendered differently from us. We have to be aware, that we can hold onto that which separates us and keeps us running on empty, when the transformative tenderness of God might release us to abundance. Nothing is more consequential in our lives, than the notion of God we hold.

What if the scriptures included more stories of the call of women by God, by She who Is?
What if our image of God was black, female, or non-binary?
What would our church, our country, our world look like?

During the years that I taught Sunday school, I fell in love with the story of Abraham and Sarah and God's call for them to move into the unknown. God came so close to Abraham and Sarah, and Sarah and Abraham so close to God, that they knew God wanted them to move into the desert. The desert was a scary place and they didn't know where they were going, but everywhere they went, they made an altar, because God was already there.

As I told it one time, one of the children pointed to the altar and said, "That's kind of like our table in church where we eat bread." I said, "Yes." We found a table and they wanted to put a priest behind it. One of the little girls said, "That's you". True to form, I said "no, that's not me, that's Wilma, and Ed, and Zelda." She looked me in the eyes as only a child can, and said, "you are a priest to us." That God might be calling me to the priesthood had been suggested to

me, but each time I shook my head and said I don't think so. In that moment, I realized that even though I have believed in the ordination of women for all these years and I grew up with strong and spunky women, I still felt that I was not worthy because I was a woman.

This innocent child had a perception untainted by the cultural influence that had impaired my own vision of who I was, of what I was called to be. If we can see ourselves and others, without the learned filters of limitation and prejudice, we may hear our own fullest calling.

It would take years until I recognized some of my own filters, and finally trusted the abundance of God to equip me for the surprising turn in my life.

There were and are other things I have not been aware of, norms that I assumed to be the way it is for everyone, like the freedom to walk through a store without being followed by a security guard, or implicit rules about conflict or silence around money. What goes unexamined will never be upended. What we resist will make us frightened, hardened, and inflexible. We need the love of God to thaw the holy in us. We need to let go of our empty nets and welcome the overwhelming bounty of God.

Occasionally, as in my case, a call can be to ordination. But the call to lives grounded in God's love for us is to be found by all of us, not just in careers but living fully every moment. We are all called to our belovedness and to the full expression of God in our unique selves—to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being. We are invited to thaw into God's love and let go of the empty nets that separate from ourselves, each other and God. There, abundance beyond our wildest dreams, awaits us with joy.

Amen