

## **Put out into Deep Water**

**Luke 5:1-11: Isaiah 6:1-8**

*Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC Camden; February 10, 2019*

“Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch!” How might Simon have felt hearing this from Jesus after an exhausting night of fishing that yielded precisely what - nothing? If anyone knows anything about fishing, it is Simon Peter, not Jesus the carpenter become healer, preacher, and prophet. I wonder how a Maine fisherman/woman would feel if a land rat gave him or her some advice on their trade. But Simon Peter has seen Jesus transform lives and heard him speak. He is getting drawn in and finds himself trusting this man against the odds. So they head out into deep water and let down the nets, suddenly catching so many fish that they need their partners to come and help with a second boat. Still, their boats are so overloaded that the boats threaten to sink. Simon Peter is so overwhelmed and awed that he can only get on his knees and say that his life is too broken to be blessed like this.

What does Jesus do? There is no judgment, just an admonition to stop being scared or ashamed and trust that God will work through him. “Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching people.” This invitation is issued in language and metaphors familiar to Simon Peter as well as James and John who are with him. They are so moved by Jesus’ presence and what they have experienced that they up and leave everything behind to follow Jesus. Could they really know what Jesus was inviting them to do? What might it mean for us today to follow Jesus in this way?

This passage has most often been interpreted in the context of the call of the first disciples to preach the Gospel and bring multitudes to faith and a new life in Christ. I would like to read this story as one about the conversion of the heart into a way of life that is the center of Jesus’ ministry. Conversion is literally about a turning around that can take place when people start to “put out into deep water” in terms of their depth of presence and love in relationship with each other. Simon Peter would spend the rest of his life wrestling with his own conversion, both in terms of standing by his love of Jesus and the call to welcome people of other faith backgrounds and cultural traditions (Acts 10 – the encounter with Cornelius). More than once, he had to go back and put out into the deeper waters of God’s way of revealing this love in and through him.

As we live in a polarized world in which many prejudices, conscious and unconscious still guide our interactions with each other, I believe we are also called to “put out into deeper water” with each other. Only that deeper water of God’s grace can turn our lives not further away from each other but toward each other as we find ourselves caught in mutual conversion. We are all in need of greater depth of the heart. I would like to draw from some aspects of the true-life story of friendship depicted in the complex

movie “The Green Book” to illustrate this. The story takes place in the early 1960’s, in the throes of racial tensions leading up to the Civil Rights movement. It is also an important story to consider during black history month.<sup>1</sup>

Tony Lip Vallelonga is a macho Italian-American man, fully immersed in his family’s life in the Bronx with his wife Dolores, two younger sons and a large extended family. Tony earned the nickname “Lip” when he was a kid because he could “bullshit people into anything,” which is not the same to him as lying. You might call him a simple man with simple tastes. Tony is a street-smart bouncer at a fancy club. He knows how to manipulate his cultural system of male bravado in which the one with the largest wad of cash, best connections – legal and illegal - , and capacity to bully wins. When the night club is closed for renovation for two months before Christmas, Tony starts looking for a temporary job.

Dr. Don Shirley is an extraordinarily gifted and lonely African-American musician living in a fancy apartment above Carnegie Hall. He is a classically trained concert pianist thanks to a scholarship at the best Russian music school, because no US school would admit a “Negro.” Don is truly cosmopolitan, speaks multiple languages, favors sophisticated clothes and manners, and collects African art and artifacts. Don has decided to go on a tour of the South with his two white music colleagues of the Don Shirley Trio. They play popularized music using classical instruments.

Don wants his own driver and assistant for the tour. Someone recommended Tony because of his street smarts and the prospects of trouble in the south. During the formal interview, Don asks Tony if he has ever worked with black people. Tony mentions that he recently had two black men over for a drink at his apartment. Actually, two black technicians had brought a new stove, observed by hovering male relatives who were supposedly protecting Dolores’ honor in Tony’s absence. It was a hot day and just as Tony arrived home, he watched Delores give the workers a drink of water. Tony threw the glasses in the trash the moment they left. Yes, Tony Lip had some black men over for a drink. Tony and Don take a good measure of each other and eventually come to a reluctant agreement as both have need of each other.

On the morning of their departure, a record label rep hands Tony the “Green Book,” a resource guide for “negro travelers” that lists all southern establishments that welcome blacks in the south. Tony is also given half of his pay and told that he will only get the other half when the two months tour is finished. If they miss a concert, he will not get paid his full due. Don and Tony’s surface differences and prejudices become

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<sup>1</sup> Having said that, I have now also heard that there has also been some criticism of the movie by African-Americans, which I will need to explore further (note added after the service).

readily apparent within the first few hours in the car. Tony's sloppy and voracious eating, his smoking, Bronx Italian diction, his habit of throwing trash out of the car window and profanity are deeply offensive to Don. Tony, on the other hand, can't get over how up-tight and reserved Don seems to be, does not know who Aretha Franklin is, has never tasted fried chicken, and has no idea about how to relax and enjoy himself.

The first concerts go quite well and Tony begins to appreciate Don's musical genius while also wondering why Don drinks so much at night. Don is touched by Tony's clumsy attempts at writing letters to Dolores that he starts to dictate romantic letters for him. They become a big hit at home.<sup>2</sup> As their travels take them further south, the racial tensions and disparities become more overt and affect their relationship in new ways. Don does not fit in with the people at the run-down motels listed in the Green Book while Tony seems out of his league at nice hotels. Don gets harassed by white men at a bar until bouncer Tony interferes. Another day, Don is not allowed to use the restroom in the fancy country club at which he is performing. His white audience gushes over his quality as an entertainer but is clueless about the wrong and hurt of the discriminations Don faces off the stage. In another incident, a police officer first insults Don and then goads Tony with discriminatory remarks against Italians until Tony smacks him. Both land in jail until Don's DC connections come through to get them out.

With time, Tony starts to ask about Don's family. Don mentions a brief marriage and a brother who doesn't talk to him. Family is everything for Tony, however annoying they can sometimes be. They also talk about music. Tony loves Don's popular style but he plays popular music in public only because his record label agent said that white people would never tolerate listening to a black man play white music. Don's true passion is classical music, especially Chopin, but who will listen?

Tony discovers another source of Don's pain when he is called by police to show up at a YMCA in the morning. Don got caught being intimate with a white man in the shower. The police have beaten Don and left both men sitting naked on the floor. Tony Lip throws Don a towel and bribes the officers into letting Don leave. As Don and Tony drive away, they begin to argue. Don is feeling humiliated and angry at the same time, feeling that the officers were rewarded after mistreating him. Tony actually doesn't judge Don's sexuality. He just says that he knows how complex life can be and seems to mean it but does not get the depth of the complexity of Don's pain. When Don challenges him on what he knows and doesn't know,

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<sup>2</sup> Don also gives Tony Speech lessons but Tony balks at Don's suggestions that they should shorten Tony's complicated last name to something like Valle when he is introduced. He is a Vallenga and nothings else will do.

Tony says something like, "I know exactly who I am. I am an Italian American family guy who grew up in the Bronx and never went anywhere else. I am not well educated and may not speak well but I know where I belong. I don't understand why you cannot be clear about who you are, etc." Don finally bursts open about what it is like to feel like you belong nowhere. He is not white enough for whites and not black enough for blacks. He is isolated and exposed to racism and homophobia. He is trying to make a difference in the world but feels utterly alone. Tony just listens.

On the night of their very last concert in Alabama, just before Christmas Eve, Don is at first welcomed by his white hosts with southern eloquence. However, he and Tony are ushered in through the kitchen and let to a kind of broom closet turned into the artist's space. Don sends Tony on to eat in the in-house restaurant while he changes into his Tuxedo. Tony sits down with members of the Trio who ask him if he has come to understand why Don went on this tour which pays so much less than gigs in NYC and presents so much overt hassle. They name Don's commitment to Martin Luther King's work for change and that he has needed not only his genius musical talent but also a great deal of courage.

When Don tries to join them at the dinner table, he is denied entry and told to drive down to a "Negro" music and food establishment. Now things really come to a head as Don finally refuses to acquiesce. All the white country club people are taken aback by the altercation but just keep eating their dinner, not seeing the disconnect. The manager finally takes Tony aside and says, "Let's cut through the crap. Your coon cannot eat here and you better talk some sense into him if you all want to be paid tonight." Aware that Tony's family depends on the income, Don offers Tony to make the situation work, but Tony finally gets what this does to Don. He wants no part in playing along, pay or no pay. Playing to this audience would just mean working all night and bringing up "empty nets."

They leave and go down the road to the restaurant for blacks where people are dancing to Jazz music. The woman behind the bar asks Don why he is wearing a Tuxedo. When he tells her his profession, she dares him to play during a break. Don offers a masterpiece performance of a piece by Chopin as the audience turns to listen. After a pregnant pause, they all break into raucous applause and then challenge Don to play with the local musicians late into the night. Together, their nets are full of delighted people. Don finally feels welcomed for who he is. Aware of Tony's hope to be home for Christmas, Don insists that they drive through the night. When Tony is so exhausted that he is ready to give up, Don takes over the steering wheel. He drives all the way to Tony's front door in NYC where his whole family is eating Christmas dinner.

At first Don declines to join them but later returns with champagne. Tony proudly introduces Dr. Don Shirley to his stunned relatives. This time, his lips speak the truth. Finally, a relative calls for an extra plate and the feast continues. Don and Tony actually remained life-long friends and died within a few months of each other. They managed to get beyond the shallow waters of prejudice and projection. There were moments that must have felt like they had been fishing all night and caught nothing only to have the spirit move them to put out their nets again. It seems to me that they were led to “catch” each other over and over again. Sometimes, this also meant having to have their lips cleaned, like Isaiah, in order to speak truth with authenticity. When the divisiveness of attitudes and behaviors of their own or from without threatened to tear them further apart, they eventually were not afraid to look at the pain all this caused. They slowly began to see the world through each other’s eyes and hearts. Their steadfastness would eventually help to draw more and more people out beyond the bounds of prejudice.

I think this is what Jesus was talking about when he said to Simon Peter that he would now “catch people.” Jesus also came to heal us and to call us out to do the hard work of love and compassion on the slow road to transformation. This means leaving certainties behind. It means risking encounters with people we do not know and with those whom we think we know only too well. The Spirit knows what gifts we each bring and where our hearts need healing right in the context of our own lives. May God give us the courage to let even our wounds be our guides as we seek to follow Jesus into the unknown. May the Spirit help us to lay aside our fear and put out into deeper waters where we can learn to “catch” each other by the grace of God. Amen.