

an address given by
The Right Reverend Robert O'Neill
at Saint John's Cathedral

“[Jesus] got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, ‘Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.’”

—Luke 5:3-4

When Peter first heard the voice of Jesus speaking to him, I am reasonably certain that he was clueless.

Peter simply had no idea where that call—where that simple invitation to take just one step out of himself—would lead. That, I believe, is a basic fact of discipleship. When Jesus calls any of us into the service of the gospel, none of us can even begin to understand or imagine where that call will lead, what is really being asked of us, or what in the end will be the cost. That's inevitable because quite simply, our desires (no matter how noble) fall short of God's desires for us, and God's vision for us (as faithful as we may be) remains much greater than our vision for ourselves. That is the proclamation of Isaiah. “My ways [are] higher than your ways,” says the Lord, “and my thoughts [are greater] than your thoughts.”¹

So I wonder what Peter was thinking when Jesus stepped into his boat on the shore of lake of Gennesaret and asked him to put out a little way from the shore?

It was not a complicated request. The crowds were eager to hear the word of God, Luke says, and they were so pressing upon Jesus that Jesus, in turn, stepped into Peter's boat and asked him to set out a little way from shore so that he could continue to teach them. It was really no problem. The task was a simple one for Peter—something he had done day in and day out all his life, a job so familiar that he could complete it without giving it a thought. He was already there, on hand, right by the boat, mending a net. The distance involved was negligible. Just put out “a little way” from the shore, Jesus had said. No bother, really. And beyond that, there was little obligation—just sit there and listen.

Peter, I imagine, thought very little of it. It was all so routine, all so familiar. And that, of course, is Luke's point. The call of God begins in small ways in our lives—sometimes without our even really noticing it. “Just take one step,” Jesus says. “Set out a just little way from shore,” Jesus says. “Not catching anything?” Jesus asks. “Well, don't set your nets there, on that side of the boat, but there, just on the other side.” It's never

¹ Isaiah 55:9

much movement initially, but that little movement makes all the difference. Like the nativity story, the very Word of God breaks into our world, into our hearts and lives, in the most ordinary and familiar ways. Jesus invites us to take just one step closer to Love, and that's it. That's the miracle—the call of God, divine love laying claim to our lives, the beginning of our participation in God's mission.

Luke tells Peter's story so simply that it can be deceiving. It all unfolds so beautifully, so naturally, so inevitably, that it is easy to miss the heart of the story. For there, right in the middle of this passage, there is a sudden twist. It comes with one simple movement. When Jesus is finished with the crowd, he turns. He turns his attention away from the crowd on the shore and then focuses exclusively on Peter in the boat. And he says just one thing. Luke puts it this way: "When he had finished speaking, [Jesus] said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.'"² Please don't miss it. There's the substance of the call of God—to put out into the deep. There's the claim that divine love really makes on our lives. If we really want to catch the abundance that God promises, we must be willing to set out into the deep waters of our hearts and our souls and our lives and our relationships. God calls us to set out in Love, with Love, into the deep waters of this world. And here in this encounter, even at the beginning of their relationship, long before Peter can really understand all that it means, Jesus offers us this sign—this icon if you will—of just where this path of discipleship will lead not only for Peter but for all who follow Jesus. No longer can Peter be content to paddle around in the shallows. No longer can Peter just sit in the boat and be a passive recipient of Jesus' wisdom. To be a disciple, he must set out, and he must set out into the deep water. It is an invitation to complete surrender. To be faithful, Peter and James and John and you and me must leave everything, and place everything we have, in the service of Love.

If that sounds challenging, it is. But that is the challenge that Jesus puts before us, and it is this very challenge that we resist. After all, the shallows are less turbulent, the shallows are more familiar, the shallows are far easier to navigate, and generally speaking, the shallows are a place where there is more company to be had in this world. But Jesus says, set out into the deep water and there let down your net. And it is there, as Jesus reveals to Peter, that God's abundance is to be found.

As we begin this 120th Convention of The Diocese of Colorado, this is the image that I would like to put before us—that Jesus calls us to stop paddling around in the shallows and to set out in Love, with Love, into the deep.

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I am pleased to say that we have already taken some significant steps forward in this diocese to engage more deeply the mission to which we have been called. As you know, in recent years the staff in the Office of the Bishop has been restructured and our operating budget has been dramatically rearranged in order to be a more mission shaped body.

² Luke 5:4

Tomorrow you will hear from the Mission Strategy Committee about the initiatives that they are undertaking to support our collective ministry of evangelism and congregational development in Colorado. And you will hear good news. We have seen recently a significant increase in the number of growing congregations in the diocese, and we have seen too a steady increase in giving by individuals to those congregations. That's good news—the result of good, intentional work that represents a real partnership and collaboration among parish clergy and lay leaders, regional missionaries, congregational development consultants, and our Canon Missioner, Lou Blanchard. You will hear more tomorrow about other mission initiatives as well—partnerships in the San Luis Valley, regional ministries in other areas, a vision for Hispanic and ethnic ministry in Colorado, the innovative evangelism and worship being explored in the “emerging church” movement, and more.

You will hear too from The Camp and Conference Center Task Force—a body charged with refining the vision and creating the plan for establishing a first rate camp and conference center for the diocese—a resource that is absolutely essential to building up the body of Christ here in Colorado. Their work is but one part of all that is being done through our Office of Faith Formation to support the good and generous and intentional work that is being done by countless volunteers throughout the diocese to nurture and form the faith of our young people—training events, Genesis and Qwest Weekends for junior and high school youth, summer camp programs for children, and retreat weekends for college students and young adults, to name a few.

Together, these efforts reflect the two key mission priorities that remain before us—(1) evangelism and church growth, and (2) substantive Christian formation for children, youth, and young adults. We are collectively doing good things. We are, all of us, moving in the right direction. It's good news, and I am grateful to you all for your care, your commitment, your faithfulness, your good will, and your prayer.

But like the gospel we heard tonight, there is that twist—that midpoint in the story in which Jesus calls those who would follow him to go even deeper.

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What might that mean for us?

For Peter, it was about entering into deeper and deeper relationship with Jesus, and as a consequence being called to enter into deeper and deeper relationship with others. With each successive step in following Jesus, Peter was called out of himself to cross the lines of division and separation that so characterized his culture and society. He was challenged, by Jesus, to sit at table and break bread with those whom others would exclude. He was invited, by God, to embrace those who were radically different from him. He did so not without his own very real inner struggle and conflict. But he did so. He did so faithfully. He did so in obedience to Jesus. And in so doing, he gave the world a glimpse of the restored humanity that God desires for all humankind. For Peter, “the deep” was about giving of himself more generously than he ever thought possible. It was

about learning increasingly to surrender himself, to abandon himself, to give himself up completely, even to point of death, which is, if you think about it, the ultimate act of generosity.

There it is, the deep water—the challenge to live out of a posture of deep generosity, freely giving of ourselves in love to Love; and, as a consequence, the challenge to enter ever more deeply into relationship with those around us whoever they may be.

Here in Colorado the call to live generously has some very real challenges both practically and relationally.

Tomorrow, you will be presented with an operating budget—funding that you all set aside from your own congregational operating funds to support one another, to support the wider mission of the Church, through the Office of the Bishop. You will see that that proposed budget reflects the key mission initiatives that we have set before us, and you will see too that that budget is balanced. That would seem to be good and well. But I have to tell you it really isn't. The funding for redeveloping the lives of our congregations is minimal. The resources to plant new congregations are extraordinarily limited. We have again reduced staffing in the Office of the Bishop. The money budgeted to support the summer camp program that has grown significantly over the past two summers will not cover the actual costs for this summer's program. Funding set aside for the College and Young Adult Committee, which began its work in August, has been removed. Planned increases in funding to support children's ministries in the diocese (training events, resources, resource development, and so on), is just not there. This balanced budget is fiscally responsible, but it is, at the same time, missionally inadequate.

This is not a complaint, just an honest statement of fact. And I want to say it as delicately and as sensitively as possible. The fact is, we are not living into the very commitments that this convention adopted in 2001—that every parish would contribute ten percent of its plate and pledge to support the work of the wider church through the Office of the Bishop, and that every parish would give five percent of its plate and pledge to support regional mission initiatives. It is not a lack of resources that holds us back. Giving by individuals to their congregations has grown significantly and steadily over the past ten years. But, at the same time, our willingness to support one another across the diocese and Church has simply not kept pace. This is not a new phenomenon in Colorado. A review of our history as a diocese shows it to be a systemic issue that spans generations. But, my friends, the time has come to reverse the trend.

It is not on the deepest level about money, but about mission. More foundationally, it is about coming to grips with how much we really do need to support one another, even on the most practical level, if we really want to do the work that God is calling us to do. We are unquestionably on the right track and moving in the right direction Colorado. I am grateful for all the support that our collective ministry receives from around the diocese. I am frankly amazed at how much we are accomplishing with relatively little. But during the coming months, I would ask very simply that every vestry

and every bishop's committee make this issue a matter of your collective prayer, and, if you have not already done so, I would ask that you develop a plan to intentionally live into the commitments that we have collectively made to support the ministries of others in our diocese and in our Church.

The fact is, we do need one another, and I believe that we are at a point in the life of our diocese, our church, and our communion, in which we are all being challenged to move into deeper, and frankly more Christ-like, relationship one to another.

This summer, I was privileged to participate in a consultation between African and American bishops. Some fifty-seven bishops were present, including six primates. The purpose of the gathering was to talk about mission—specifically to explore ways in which we might deepen our partnerships in the service of God's mission. We prayed together. We spent every morning in the richest and most rewarding bible study I have ever experienced. We broke bread together and engaged in both formal and informal conversation. We were a group of bishops with very diverse theological and political views, to be sure. We talked openly about issues of sexuality, to be sure. But frankly we talked about more—particularly how we, as Christians, are challenged to bear witness to the gospel in our world today, a world in which “the rich are getting stinking rich and the poor are getting desperately poor”³ and a world in which these gross disparities do nothing but breed a continuing cycle of fear, hatred, division, and violence.

The fact is that the world cries out to us. Our sisters and brothers in the third world need us, and even more importantly, we in the United States need our sisters and brothers in the third world. We need them to call us out of ourselves, to call us out of our own self-absorbed and isolated little worlds and into a greater and more courageous practice of our faith. This is the work to which we are called, and this is the crucible—one with another, with all of our challenging differences, globally, nationally, and locally—in which we will be transformed. As one young African bishop said, “Until now we have been a Communion in name only.” Now, he observed, we are being challenged to engage our relationships more deeply in order to become a Communion in reality. We certainly did not agree on everything during the course of our consultation, but on one thing we were of one mind and one heart—that we need each other and that we have no intention of breaking relationship.

This is the vision for which our world longs—one body, giving itself generously in love, for the sake of a suffering world.

This is the direction in which we, like Peter, are called to move—to set out into the deep, embracing one another fearlessly, courageously, freely, generously, with gentleness, with humility, with compassion, and with the infinite Love that is God.

—*Amen*

³ The phrase is one used by Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungani of Southern Africa.