

I hear talk about the need to grow, to increase in numbers at Sand Point. And sometimes I wonder, what is the motivation behind that desire? It's a good spiritual practice to do some of that selfreflection, to understand what lies beneath our motivation. And we have to be honest with ourselves. Do we really want to open our doors to the community and let just anybody in?

I want to offer a humorous, yet telling story. And my intention is not to offend, so if you find yourself in the story, please take it in the spirit it is offered. A few weeks back we had a Church Council meeting. As the meeting began, all the seats in the Fireside room filled up, with the exception of two available spaces. One more person came in for the meeting, and began to sit down. Somebody piped up saying, "That seat is for the secretary." As this person moved to the only other vacant seat, the person adjacent said, "I was hoping no one would sit next to me." Now, this is a group of goodnatured folks who know one another well. And certainly more chairs could have been brought in. But it demonstrates our human nature.

I want to take you on a trip with me for a moment. I'm at the airport. I've somehow made it through security – shoes and watch off, laptop and toiletries out of my bag, boarding pass and driver's license still in possession. With a sigh of relief, I make it through and head to my gate with a few extra moments to spare. Finally, it's time to board the plane. I'm the first one to get seated in my row at the window, and I offer a prayer of gratitude, "Maybe I'll have the whole row to myself." No sooner is that prayer uttered than someone takes their seat on the aisle. My next prayer is a bit more selfish. "Please God, maybe it won't be a full flight. At least let the middle seat remain empty." In these days of flying, my prayer is definitely not answered. And then my prayer becomes judgmental as I become protective of my little cubicle of personal space. I'm hoping they don't take up the whole arm rest. And hoping beyond little chit chat, the conversation won't go beyond that. I'm certainly praying they won't ask me what I do for a living. I would never want to admit I'm a pastor. That will commit me to a lengthy conversation. So I start to rehearse my answer – "I'm in the insurance business. I'm in communications." Not exactly a lie.

Bishop Sally Dyck of Minnesota came out to speak to our clergy gathering a few years back. Her husband is also a pastor, and when someone in the seat next to him asked him what his job was, he lied and said, "I'm a brain surgeon." And the fellow next to him said, "How amazing. Me, too!!" My prayer on airplanes is a 5-fold prayer: 1) I pray to God to graciously see fit to give me the whole seat to myself; 2) when that doesn't pan out, I pray for at least the middle seat to be left empty; 3) when God does not answer my prayer at that point I pray for someone of small stature to fill the seat; 4) and then the prayer becomes, "please don't let them be the chatty kind"; 5) my last prayer I lift to God is, "Please don't let them ask me what I do for a living." Because then I know I'm in for a long conversation.

I don't think we're any different in churches. We don't want people moving into our territory, our personal space, and we definitely don't want to get trapped in conversations.

We have this altruistic motive, I want the church to grow as long as:

I can keep the friends I have

My church doesn't change

They fit in and look like me.

They don't create any conflict and ruffle the waters.

I don't have to do anything. I'll just be polite when people do come in.

My worship time stays the same, I get to sing my favorite hymns.
As long as it doesn't ask anything of me.

And so, we come to this story of Jesus calling his first disciples. I don't know if he had criteria for those who would belong to his church. I don't know if he hand-picked the people who would join him on his mission and ministry, or if he simply cast the net deep and far and wide, as he told Peter to do to catch his haul of fish.

Jesus is backed up by the crowd, right up against the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and the people are all around him, hungry to hear a word. Wouldn't that be nice to have at Sand Point? Nearby are some tired fishermen who have been fishing all night and have caught nothing. They're minding their own business, literally, just trying to clean their nets and head home after a long and discouraging night, but Jesus asks one of them, Simon, if he could use his boat as a kind of speaking platform. People would be able to see and hear Jesus better if Simon would just put out a little way into the water, in the shallow part of the lake. Jesus begins to teach. No microphone, no Powerpoint, no notes. Not one word of Jesus is recorded from his speech for the evening news, and yet a remarkable thing happens. Jesus tells Simon, "*Put out into the deep and let your nets down for a catch.*" This is counter-intuitive to Simon, since he just got back from fishing all night without catching a single fish. *But, he says to Jesus, "If you say so,"* and he heads out into the deep water. What happens next – he catches so many fish that the other fishermen have to come and help, and the boats start to sink from the enormous catch! Peter has sense enough to recognize a miracle when he sees one. Simon's name actually changes right in the middle of the story – suddenly he's Simon Peter. He is awestruck, "*Lord, I'm a sinner and can't handle this holiness.*" "*Don't be afraid,*" Jesus says. "*From now on, you're going to be fishing for people.*" Next thing you know, Peter, James and John walk away from their boats, their sources of livelihood and security; they leave everything to follow Jesus.

What did it take for them to walk away from their boats, livelihood and identity? In the Gospel of MT, Zebedee, the father of James and John, stays with the boat when the others leave to follow Jesus. After all, somebody has to clean up and get the fish to market. Everyday work had to go on. I think our boats matter a lot to us, too. It would take a lot for us to walk away from our homes, our jobs, our retirement savings, our health insurance. Maybe like Zebedee, it strikes us, as unrealistic and perhaps irresponsible to walk away. But maybe that's not the whole point of the story. Mother Teresa used to say, "*Americans are always saying they want to leave their lives and go to India to work with her.*" Instead she says, "*Stay here, right where you are, and love the people God has given you to love. Care for people right where you are.*"

If we truly want to follow Jesus, we don't necessarily have to leave home and family. Jesus told the seasoned but tired fishermen to strike out into the deep rather than head safely home after a long day. What does it mean in our lives to "strike out into the deep," when we're tired and convinced that no one is interested in what God has done in our lives, or that Sand Point could possibly be a place of spiritual renewal, where as the UCC tagline goes... "God is still speaking." Especially when our culture offers such enticing invitations in other directions. We can't even convince our own family members to come to church and potentially have their lives transformed. We definitely don't want to risk more rejection from our neighbors and friends. We know in our very unchurched area that most people in Seattle would rather be doing any number of things besides getting up to go to church. We could probably list a dozen things within the next 10 seconds right now. I have no influence over my friends.
Super Bowl
Husky Game

Sleeping in/reading paper/drinking coffee
Cleaning house
Skiing
Taking Fido for a walk
Getting a massage
Going for a hike
Meeting friends for coffee

The water is plenty deep right here, right where we live. There's plenty of challenge, plenty of possibility, and a very clear call to serve right here. One of the most important things we do, however, is to look around and make sure there's room in our boat for others.

"The deep" might represent those places we would rather not go, the places of discomfort and unfamiliarity, where we might get in over our heads. We'd rather stay here, in the shallow end of things where our boat won't be rocked, where life is safe, and not strike out into the deep water of possibilities and change; we'd rather mind our own business and work on our security. What if we become a reconciling congregation, welcoming of ALL people, as our mission statement beautifully reads – "Inclusive..." What if "too many" of "those people" show up? Who are those people in our minds? How will we "deal" with the situations that may arise? There are too many things that could go wrong, too many people who might be upset, and we may be better off just calling it a day and staying here, in the shallow water, drying our nets.

One question we ask is: What will make our church grow? A better question might be: What is keeping our church from growing? And what is our motivation? A better question is: Why would people want to come here? What do we offer?

I would bet that each one of you has had an experience at one time or another of God at work in your life. Do you come to worship with the anticipation of feeling the presence of God. Or expect that God will meet you, or God is speaking to you, or God answering you? I hope so. What was the event or events of your life that brought you to church? That brought you to Sand Point specifically? For as many people that are worshipping this morning, there is probably twice as many reasons for being here.

Family tradition, habit, sense of meaning and purpose, desire to grow spiritually, sense of belonging, social needs met. Is our church more like Rotary, or Country Club? Is it a place for mission to be lived out, is it a refuge of safety, or a hospital where people can find healing and wholeness?

For those of you that are here, there is something about Sand Point that has been a gift to you. What would happen if that experience changed your life, our life together, in such a way that we couldn't help telling the world about it? What if we shared what God is doing in our lives, what God is doing in this church. People would be touched by the ministry of this church; they might hear a word of good news so compelling that their lives, too, would never be the same. There are people that are spiritually hungry.

I invite you to get in touch with what that is, and realize that if it could be that for you, it could offer a sense of meaning and purpose, healing and wholeness for others. Why should we keep that a secret. Tell your story about how God is working in your life. Story and personal experience is powerful. It's

not about growth for growth's sake. It's not about numbers. It's about sharing the good news. What is compelling enough for you to share how God is working. What if we step up and offer our gifts to the community around us, our time and our talents in ways that help others and build up the community?

God's word in this story "falls on the ears of the crowds hungry for that word; it falls on the ears of Simon and James and John, afraid, amazed, attracted, and ready." And it falls on our ears today: "God's living word. Evangelism isn't about convincing others of our truth or getting them to accept our beliefs, but instead it is the practice of sharing and living the word that has transformed our lives with such grace and power that we can't help but tell the story.