

THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER

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PRESSING

when Jesus plays hard to get

by Drew Downs

In the synoptic gospels the crowds play a fascinating role in driving Jesus away from the masses. In Luke it says they were “pressing in on him” to hear him. Elsewhere the crowds are so forceful and voluminous, they threaten his safety. This reminds me of the paparazzi chasing down celebrities and the often tragic consequences. But I’ve never heard a person of faith ever suggest that people press Jesus too much, endanger his life like that. But it does say that.

When the people try to get what *they* want, Jesus eludes them. When they try to kill him in his hometown, he is able to walk through the crowd, as if by magic. Now, he gets in a boat and recruits some disciples. This, too, seems suggestive of how Jesus might respond to our own desires, demands, declarations about his direct support of our lives. Are we pressing Jesus now, when we keep asking for his help, expecting him to fix things for us that we have direct control over?

AFTER THE EPIPHANY

2025

WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

The Souper Bowl

For the second year in a row, we're participating with ecumenical partners in the community to collect food for the student food pantry of our ministry partners in United Campus Ministries (UCM). It is a wonderful opportunity to give generously and with joy at a time when need is great.

I've shared the story many times of the experience last year, when seven churches collected over two thousand pounds of food — a literal ton — and restocked the shelves to overflowing with incredible abundance. The nets were full-to-bursting, my friends. And then, too, the tears of joy, the testimony that Dawn Black, UCM's campus minister offered of this generous giving — how bare the shelves were and suddenly, we gave them more food than they had collected all of last year. She was left nearly speechless.

I want to name something else that is a joy to me in this effort. These are historic connections we are tapping into here, from a time of renewed hope and joyous collaboration. From a time we often call "the ecumenical movement." Partnerships across denominational lines were formed for the first time ever. Churches worked together as if we have a common mission (we do). Again, for the first time.

This stuff might seem normal, but it still isn't habitual to us. And a season of regression (over decades) sent us naval-gazing again. But we joined with others to found UCM and we give to the work they do on our campuses to serve the church's most underserved demographic. And I hope that, in giving and sharing and gently competing, we are actually rediscovering our purpose is to serve Christ, not grow (or save) our denomination.

With love,
Drew

AFTER THE EPIPHANY

2025

FOR SUNDAY

Epiphany 5C

February 9, 2025

Collect

Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Reading

Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He 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." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Reflection

This scene of Jesus and the miraculous catch was set up in the previous chapter. There Jesus starts preaching and teaching in the area around his hometown. His work attracts attention, for sure. And he attends one family in particular, a fisherman named Simon, whose mother-in-law, who was suffering from a high fever, and it says that Jesus “rebuked the fever, and it left her.”

When Jesus is overwhelmed by the crowds and looks for safety in a boat, he finds himself in whose boat? Simon’s.

Is this a coincidence or intentional? I’m not sure it really matters because it is a thing that happens. And something else for us is this means Jesus isn’t a stranger to them – an unknown. He’s a healer who helped Simon. This is a man of consequence and some true power. Then Jesus unleashes a new power they don’t see coming at all. He can seemingly persuade fish to swim into their nets like Aquaman. Or else he can multiply the meager collection of fish they are gathering from the sea. Perhaps it is even something else entirely: a kind of conjuration that manifests fish within the net for them. I don’t think the happenstance matters much either, as the results are the same.

Simon and company don’t account for this new abundance as an absolute good. It is easy to call it *too much* as their boat begins to sink. And Peter’s response is to suggest Jesus reject *him*: “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

I’m not sure we are all in Peter’s proverbial boat. Many of us are so focused on counting up the fish in that net that we miss that Peter is afraid and feeling unworthy. Not because he was taught to be performatively humble, but because he genuinely believes it.

Even after witnessing the miraculous, it takes assurance that this is the point that gets Simon to follow Jesus. The same sort of assurance we’re offered. That we, too, are good enough for this work.

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