

INTO THE DEEP WATER

Keynote Address for the 54th Annual Gathering of the IKCUCC

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Luke 5:1-11

5 Once while Jesus^[a] was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ² he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³ 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. ⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." ⁵ Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." ⁶ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷ 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. ⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" ⁹ For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

In the fall of 2004 I went on a trip to the Middle East to walk some of the biblical lands and help with a fact-finding mission in Israeli and Palestinian territories. Our first stop was Egypt where we saw the Gisa Pyramids and the ancient Luxor Temples before traveling to the base of Mt. Sinai in the Sinai Peninsula. After Sinai, we traveled to Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Nazareth. It was truly eye opening to walk the path that so many of the great people of faith before us had walked. I found this to be particularly true while in Nazareth. We came to that body of water in the New Testament that continually was presented as the place of calling, conversion, and transformation: *the Sea of Galilee*. And it was there, too, that my eyes were opened.

When we arrived at the shore of the Sea of Galilee, there was a restaurant there where we would eat our lunch. We all unloaded from the bus and before we went inside we went to the shoreline for a closer look at the Sea. It was quiet, calm, the waves moved slowly in and out. As I stood there I was recalling the many times in scripture that this very space transformed the lives of those who would become Jesus' disciples. This was the epicenter of Jesus' challenge to them to come and follow. I pondered how Jesus called out Peter and Andrew, James and John, to leave their boats and their families. I recalled the time that Jesus came out walking on the water and how he asked Peter to join him. I recalled the moment after the resurrection when Peter decided to go back to his nets and the resurrected Christ showed up on the shoreline to remind him that he had a greater calling ahead of him. I remembered the time that Jesus went out on to the boat and fell asleep only to have a huge storm come upon them. With the disciples terrified of dying, they called upon Jesus and with his word and power, he calmed the storm. Jesus also took his disciples with him out on to the water to get

away from the crowds in order to renew their spirits. And, then, of course there is this terrific story that we just read in which Jesus challenges Peter to cast his nets out into the deeper water.

All these stories came flooding into my mind as I stood there on the shore of that famous sea and I began to wonder to myself, "There are a lot of stories about this sea. In all of these narratives, just what exactly was Jesus trying to say?" I didn't have the answer, but then God didn't leave me hanging for long. The Sea of Galilee is fully surrounded by mountains and so the weather can really change in the blink of an eye, and with little warning. And so it was for us that day, out of nowhere this raging storm came in with lightning and thunder, heavy rain, and a violent wind. All of these scriptures surrounding the Sea suddenly became illuminated. Of course the disciples were terrified of the high winds and storms. If a storm can come upon a boat like that in less than five minutes, then, yes, being asked to journey out into the middle or into the deep water was scary and even risky. When one adds to this the ancient mythologies at the time of the deep water hosting the leviathan and other dangerous sea creatures of the deep, it is no wonder that the disciples were fearful of leaving the shoreline without any sense of safety net. And so, one of the answers to the question, "In all of these stories of the Sea, just what exactly was Jesus trying to say?" became clear. ***Jesus was asking the disciples, and by extension those of us in this room, to be a people of courage, willing to face our greatest fears and to risk trusting God with an unknown future.***

This particular passage of scripture in Luke comes after Jesus' baptism and journey into the desert and even his encounter in the Temple reading from the scroll of Isaiah. Jesus arrives at the Sea that I have been describing and there sits Peter, a great fisherman who had struck out after fishing all night long. This is the place of their first encounter with Jesus and it is the place of his calling them to a ministry of fishing for people. In this case, Jesus sees the boat in shallow water and he asks them to push out a bit from shore. He preaches for some time, but then he requests of Peter to cast his net out into the deep water. Peter is skeptical, not just because he has tried that for the last twenty-four hours and come up empty, but because such an act places himself and others at great risk and peril of the deepness of the sea and the ever present possibility that in a matter of moments a storm could rush in and take their lives. Jesus went straight to the heart of Peter's fear and Peter was acutely aware that Jesus was asking him to take great courage in acting on his request, that it would take faith and trust to overcome his greatest fears. And so, from day one, the Bible tells us that those who would give up their nets, their former lives, their families, their homes to follow this Jesus will have to embrace the unknown and be willing to not take the easy and comfortable route, but instead take risks to extend courage no matter where their journey may take them. Jesus asked them and he asks us to cast our nets out into the deep water, a place of risk, vulnerability, and courage.

But, here is the thing about risk, vulnerability, and courage: We live in a world where we are taught that we dare not risk that which we feel we have no control over. We would much rather play something safe and stick with the familiar shores of our life, than to risk failure and the uncertainty of the unknown. We fear the very things that we don't understand or have yet to experience, which ultimately triggers our fight or flight mechanism. This is why so many of us prefer to drive than fly. We are under the illusion that if we can place our hands on the wheel of a car that we are somehow still in control. But, it is an illusion. Studies have shown clearly that flying is significantly safer than driving, but in order to fly we have to let go of control and place our trust into the hands of someone we cannot see to get us where we are going safe and sound. To take risks has not come to be seen as courageous and hopeful, but rather has come to be seen as a weakness. So, what exactly is the greatest measure of courage? Author and renowned speaker, Brene Brown says that the greatest

measure of courage is vulnerability, or taking the risk to show up in life, casting our nets out into the deeper water even though we are terrified.

I am an avid reader, and I enjoy reading new things. But every year, without fail, three books find their way back to the top of my pile. One ought to be obvious because I am a clergy person....and so I read the Bible regularly. But, the other two books' messages are so compelling that the truths I find there are places I must return to regularly. I will read Don Miguel Ruiz's book "The Four Agreements" and the other book is Brene Brown's "Daring Greatly." The title of Brown's book comes not only from her research into vulnerability, but is derived from Teddy Roosevelt's famous speech in Paris in 1910, sometimes titled "The Man in the Arena." The following quote becomes the heart and soul of her book. Roosevelt shares:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by the dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly..."

If I were to sum up her book I would do it this way. Several months ago, our daughter came home from an outing with close friends at the park with this guilty look on her face. She didn't really want to talk about it at first, but after some coaxing she shared that her shoes were all a mess because she and her friends were jumping in mud puddles at the park. She assumed we would be mad and upset. We laughed and told her that she didn't have to worry and that we would just clean the shoes. We spend an awful lot of time in this life worrying about getting our shoes dirty, that playing in mud puddles will get us in trouble with someone above us. Brene Brown's book is about those who are willing to jump in the mud puddles and get a little dirty....to jump into the arenas of life and come out with faces marred by the sweat and tears that it takes to be successful. In other words, at the heart of human behavior is a notion of vulnerability, a willingness to be "all in" with our life, in spite of whatever failures, flaws, and uncertainties may come with us on the journey.

Vulnerability is hard because it risks allowing our truest selves to be harmed, to be trampled upon, or hurt. Our fight or flight mechanism does not like this idea of vulnerability and would rather we just always play it safe. But, truthfully, anything that is worth anything in this life will have risks involved and will demand that we show up in our lives, that we arrive at the arena, that we are willing to dare greatly with our lives no matter the outcome. Our truest and highest selves is centered in a willingness for us to be faithful and true to who we are and who God has created us to be.....and to be faithful to this true self will mean us daring greatly.

Today at this 54th Annual Gathering of the Indiana Kentucky Conference, *WE* are Peter and Jesus is asking us to put our boat out from shore and to cast our net into the deep water.....to dare greatly with our lives, our ministries, our churches, our associations, and this conference. Jesus is asking us to show up! But, showing up for such a journey means us first taking a good look at just exactly where we are and who we are. Brene Brown says this:

“What we know matters, but who we are matters more. Being rather than knowing requires showing up and letting ourselves be seen. It requires us to dare greatly, to be vulnerable. The first step of that journey is understanding where we are, what we’re up against, and where we need to go.”

When I think of **where we are** as a conference I like to think of a particular biblical image. I think of the Israelites standing on the other side of the Red Sea. God’s people walked through the Red Sea on dry ground and now they stand on the other side looking upon the terrain of the journey that is ahead. One of the first things the Israelites do when they begin their journey to the Promised Land is panic. I get it. They are looking ahead and recognizing that to walk into that desert and wilderness ahead means a great deal of uncertainty and many questions arise. Where will we find food and water? Will we be safe from harm? How do we even know where we are going and will God be there to guide us? Frankly, I can’t blame the Israelites. Going a place you have never been before seems daunting and in this era of GPS and cell phones that can get you wherever you want, I am reminded of just how much true courage it took to go out into the unknown and trust God to provide. In the beginning, they begged Moses to take them back to Egypt. I don’t think they wanted to go back because they enjoyed the life of oppression, but I think they wanted to go back because they knew what to expect, they knew there would be food to eat and community to share their lives with. But, they began shouting at Moses “What have you done bringing us out here to die in the wilderness?” Through small miracles, providing food or water and the leading cloud of fire, God was still able to move the Israelites towards a new future, no matter how uncertain and risky it may have seemed.

Conferences across the United Church of Christ are beginning to ask themselves where our journey is taking us next. The future of Church and denominational structures is beginning to change and transform as the next generations reimagine with us what it means to be a follower of Christ. Some of our past structures have become unsustainable and some of them have failed to live into the faithfulness of the mission of the Gospel. We here in the Indiana Kentucky Conference are not alone in standing on the edge of a new journey, but we certainly have our own course to follow. In the course of the past 5 years we have moved from holding a good portion of the third floor of the Interchurch Center here in Indianapolis with multiple staff from the Conference Minister, ACMs, support staff, and administrative staff, to in the last 6 months moving to now one office staff, 3 10 hour a week ACMs, and one full time Conference Minister. In the last year, we as a conference, like other conferences across the denomination, had to make the hard decision to let go of our Camp at Merom. And so, yes, we stand here today in a time of uncertainty, in a time of transition, and if we were a neutral observer we might look at these dynamics and conclude that we are headed for a crash course with disaster. While these realities are, indeed, a part of our journey, there is yet another part to this story.

In the last year we also embarked on a dreams and visions process that has moved us toward a new journey. The Board of Directors put together a team of people who would develop surveys, have conversations with pastors, laity, and associations to get input. After all was said and done, the information collected pointed to several areas of focus that would be our compass for moving in a new direction. But, above all, what this process showed us is that there is a deep disconnection between our local churches and the Conference as a whole. And so, our dreaming and visioning has begun pushing us towards action, programming, and structures that will offer us a way forward that relies on a strong vision of connection, interdependency, and mission for the work of God’s realm at this time and in this place. It was made abundantly clear to me in my interview process that this new

journey we are about to take on will look significantly different than what it has in the past...that we must experiment, share in innovation, creativity, and be unafraid to do something completely new with how we live out our life as a conference. This vision is a catch 22 because on the one hand it is exciting to be on the cutting edge of what it looks like to re-imagine the covenant we have as a conference in the United Church of Christ. However, on the other hand, it is hard to let go of old ways, old habits, and the pathways of yesteryear. It is hard to risk going out into the unknown and casting our nets out into the deep water. So many of you have invested your lives, your careers, your time, and your money in this Conference and you do not want that investment to go to waste. And so, these times of risk and vulnerability will require of us great courage, where we can agree together to dare greatly with our ministries and our visions as a conference.

What Are We Up Against?

We are up against declining churches. It is true that more of our churches across denominational lines, including evangelicals, are not only seeing declining numbers, but churches that are closing altogether. According to the research of Diana Butler Bass, 1 in 4 Americans no longer identifies with any particular religious tradition and when we take this down to only numbers among millennials that changes to a staggering 1 in 3 Americans. In fact, over the last decade nearly 700,000 people in America each year have left any form of traditional religion, making “no religion” the second largest religiously identified group in America.

Churches, therefore, are seeing not only shrinking attendance, but a decline in effective programming and a stark reality of change in financial viability...trying to upkeep old buildings without the finances to do it. Across most denominations, many of our local churches are beginning to move to part time pastorates, which is also forcing many clergy to consider bi-vocational approaches to ministry. And, yes, while these numbers and realities are troubling, what is perhaps even more troubling is the apparent lack of clear vision that churches have for their ministries, beyond just keeping the doors open. Many of our churches are unaware of why they even exist. Something has to change.

We are facing the reshaping of our conferences. The local church is not the only place where we are seeing this kind of rapid decline. Conferences across the United Church of Christ are struggling to make sense of the viability of their current structures. While we certainly have several conferences that are strong and sustainable, many of us are simply holding on, hoping for something to change. Leadership from lay or clergy in our conferences is less and less. Some of the old ministries and committees we used to have are slowly dwindling away. Local churches facing their own decline find themselves having to decide between paying their pastor, funding their ministries, and contributing to OCWM. And so, our OCWM dollars are clearly less and less. In terms of raw numbers, the United Church of Christ once was a 3 million member institution with over 300 staff at the national level. We are now close to 1 million members with just over 100 staff at the national level. So, the trend we are seeing is that as the church struggles with its own future, our denominational structures are mirroring these very realities. Why? Because our lives are intricately intertwined, especially in the UCC as we believe so strongly in the theology of covenant. As we face the decline of our conferences, it is clear that a transformation is necessary and we in the Indiana Kentucky Conference are one of the first to stare this transformation right in the face and express that we are “all in.” Our Dreams and Visions process has yielded a commitment to change that will move us forward towards a new future, if we remain diligent in listening for God’s Still Speaking voice in our midst.

In spite of what we are up against, another story is also being told. It would be easy for us to put our head down in the sand and weep for the time that once was in our conference and in our local churches. In some cases, we might have good reason to do so. But, friends, it is the season of Pentecost, a season that reminds us that just when we think something has surrendered to death, that new life, resurrection, and a new Spirit can blow through us and create something entirely new. In fact, I have seen signs of this new life even in the short 5 weeks that I have been on the job visiting your churches, your associations, and pastors. When I have been by to bear witness to God's work in your midst, I don't see people with heads down in worry about the future. I see people showing up in the arena and risking for the sake of the gospel. I have seen

~Churches and Conference Committees working towards disaster relief.

~Congregations feeding and reaching out to the homeless and vulnerable.

~Churches picking up the pieces from difficult situations and dreaming of a new future.

~In the midst of a time when it is popular to ignore climate change, there are congregations putting up solar panels in their parking lots or putting up billboard signs encouraging their communities to believe in science and support the care of God's Creation.

~I have witnessed churches extending an intentional extravagant welcome to all persons, but especially to those in our world who are vulnerable or shunned. I have seen IKC churches welcome any age from children to older adults, the poor and the wealthy, those who identify as LGBTQ, and those who may be struggling with mental illness. These places of extravagant welcome are necessary because there are so many places in the world of religious institutions where the vulnerable are not welcomed and are discouraged from being a part of the body of Christ.

~I have seen a group of clergy in the Kentuckiana Association pen a letter to the Governor of Kentucky challenging him to take a broader approach to the gun violence in the city of Louisville.

We may be up against some significant challenges, but these are the things I have seen in just 5 short weeks. These are not signs of a dead church, but one whose primary message of love, compassion, justice, and peace is more relevant and needed now than ever. So, IKC, I see you and I hear you. I will be praying for your continued witness to God's love in the world, to one another, and the wider work of the UCC.

So, given where we are as a conference, as churches and given what we are up against, we need to be asking **where we need to go next.** While I know I will play a significant role in the IKC, I do not believe that I possess all the answers towards a future of transformation in our conference. Neither do I believe that it will be me that will bring about such change. I believe that the scriptures readily argue that the work of the Gospel is one of co-creation. We will work together in co-creating whatever it is that God desires of us in the future. This is not a ministry of independence, but rather one of interdependence. And so, how do I see such a ministry of co-creation taking place in our conference? **The work of a conference is only effective in so far as it serves adequately its associations and local parishes under its care.** As I have begun to envision what this kind of service will look like, I see my calling to work with you as three-fold:

- 1) **Nurturing Clergy: *The support, care, and nurture of authorized ministers in the IKC is vital and key.*** We must find ways to support clergy either in the parish setting, chaplaincy setting, or missionary setting by offering tools for further growth, professional development, proper boundary training, and a sense of collegiality among other clergy. We will seek innovative ways to encourage creativity in the local parish and our various ministry settings.
- 2) **Resourcing Congregations: *We must support the work of revitalization among local churches that are struggling and on-going support for those churches that are vital and seeking to continue their strong work.*** We will work hard to bring revitalization tools to our local churches and develop spaces of leadership development. We will work on leadership development by constructing a potential conference wide lay school to foster the future leaders of our local churches. And, we will also be providing support to local churches through a thorough and strong Search and Call support system through Conference staff.
- 3) **Build Up Associations: *The future growth of our churches will also depend upon us building up and having strong Associations.*** Because of the covenantal nature of our life in the UCC, it is in our associations that we find our covenant to be most salient. It is in our associations that authorization and standing are accomplished. It is in our associations that the network of churches can work together for common mission. It is in our associations that individuals are called to ministry and ordained to word and sacrament, teaching and preaching. When our associations suffer, our local congregations suffer. When our associations are flourishing, the potential for healthy churches is strengthened. But the way in which we work to build up our associations will need to look different. Several ways in which we develop our associations is better training of our Committees on Ministry, sharpening our communication with one another so that there is transparency and clarity over what we are living out as God's people, and finally developing projects of working together in common mission.

Daring Greatly Together!

I began sharing with you today from a story at the Sea of Galilee, a place of God's calling to go and risk with the courage of faith by casting our nets into the deep water. I began with the deep water and I want to end with the deep water. ***Friends, come and take a risk with me.*** From Ft. Wayne to Evansville, from the Chicago region to Rising Sun, from South Bend to Indianapolis to Louisville to Lexington, Berea and Paducah, I invite you to show up with me in the arenas of our mutual ministry. Do I expect that we will fail somewhere along the way? Yes! We learn from those moments when what we have attempted doesn't succeed. I have no doubt that as your conference minister that I will make mistakes and that I will disappoint you and not live out this calling perfectly. But, with God's grace I will stand back up, I will show up again the next day and the next and I will keep casting that net out into the deep water until that net is so full it is hard to pull it up on to shore.

This past January, the Board of Directors of this conference extended to me an invitation to come on a journey with you into an unknown future. I'll be honest, with a stable and thriving job in a local church and two young kids, I knew this would be a risk. It would have been easy to stay. But, I'm here. Why? Because I saw the power of this new experiment, I could see the fire in the belly of the IKC Board, I could see their hunger for a new path, and their fire became my fire, their hunger my hunger and I began feeling deeply called to the work that is happening here in this conference. And so, I decided to take my net and cast it into the deep water with you and to trust that God would be our guide along the way. I recognize that many of you may not know me, that you have questions about our future, and that I am the new kid on the block. I stand here today not because I am perfect,

or had a silver bullet ten-point plan designed for our transformation, and neither because I have the most experience in conference ministry. I stand here because I heard God's call and when it would have been easy to stay near the safe waters of the shore, I was willing to say yes to that call, push off from the shore, and cast my net with you in the deep and risky waters of our ministry here in the IKC. Wanting to stay in those safe shores is rather tempting, though. It makes me think of that place in C.S. Lewis' book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when Susan asks the Beavers if Aslan the Lion, whom she has yet to meet, is safe. She says, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion"..."Safe?" said Mr Beaver ..."Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.'" ***Friends, risk is rarely safe, but it is often good and holy.***

And so, here is what I need from you, the Indiana Kentucky Conference. What I need from you is a willingness to take a risk with me, to cast out into the deep waters and show up in the arena of our shared ministry. I am asking you to take risks in your local churches, in your committees on ministry, in your personal faith. Come, let's go on this journey together and see what God might have in mind. If you would be willing to journey with me, here is my pledge to you. ***I intend on showing up.*** I intend to show up in your churches, your associations, in hospital rooms, in protests, at ordinations and installations, in moments of conflict and in moments of great celebration. Most importantly, I will show up with passion and with conviction. I am thankful to the Board for the opportunity to share with you this morning and I will leave you with this poem from Carrie Newcomer:

SHOWING UP

You are holy and sacred and utterly unique.

There are gifts you were born to give. Songs you were born to sing. Stories you were born to tell.

And if you do not give it, the world will simply lose it. It is yours alone to offer, no one can give it for you.

And dearest, listen, because this is important, this wounded world needs all the songs we can pull from the air, every story that helps us to remember. It needs every single gift, large and small.

And yes, dearest, this grateful world does rejoice every courageous time we are true to ourselves and to our gifts.

And so it is, dear heart, we embrace the song and the story and all our gifts because the world has such great need and because the world exceedingly rejoices and because there is no sadder thing than to leave this world having never really shown up.

I intend on showing up! How about you? Thank you.