



Between Text and Sermon

Luke 5:1–11

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Reading biblical texts with a womanist lens makes a fundamental admission that where we come from and who we are influences how we read the Bible. Of course, all communities read from their space, interpret the text in ways that are meaningful for their space, and hear sermons preached and lessons taught listening for themes that would be applicable to their space.¹ But from a womanist space, relationships and listening are prominent values often expressed in hospitality.

Dr. N. Lynne Westfield, Executive Director of the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, in her book *Dear Sisters: A Womanist Practice of Hospitality*, quotes Henri Nouwen's definition: "Hospitality...means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them a space where change can take place...We cannot change the world with a new plan, project or idea. We cannot even change other people by our own convictions, stories, or advice and proposals, but we can offer space where people are encouraged to disarm themselves, to lay aside their occupations and preoccupations and to listen with attention and care to the voices speaking in their own center."²

Westfield writes, "Scripture reminds us that giving is better than receiving (Acts 20:35). This wisdom points to the nobility of hosting and the difficulty of being a guest. As the guest, the one who submits to receive, one allows the host to take the better part: 'To engage in the reciprocity of hospitality is to welcome something new, unfamiliar and unknown into our life-world.' Hospitality is powerful because it can provide contexts in which crucial interactions of love, compassion, and empathy, which are means of grace, have a chance to take place. Hospitality has everything to do with being able to exhale, breathe deeply, and talk openly."³ Jesus's request to use Simon Peter's boat as a pulpit and Simon Peter's response were an expression of hospitality, the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend and offered an opportunity to develop a relationship.

Dr. Edwin J. Nichols, a clinical/industrial psychologist, working in organizational development, is known for creating cultural lenses that help to reframe how people from different cultural backgrounds can do meaningful work together for equity and inclusion. Dr. Nichols's hallmark

1 Brian K. Blount, Cain Hope Felder, Clarice J. Martin, and Emerson B. Powery, eds., *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2007), 4.

2 N. Lynne Westfield, *Dear Sisters: A Womanist Practice of Hospitality* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001), 46–48.

3 Ibid., 49.

paradigm: *The Philosophical Aspects of Cultural Difference* affords insights into the essence of ethnic difference from the philosophical disciplines of axiology (values), epistemology (ways of knowing,) logic (principles of reason) and process (principles of practice). The awareness of self and others facilitates cultural competence in leadership, which affords the full use of a multiethnic, pluralistic, and linguistically diverse workforce or community. For Africans, African Americans, Hispanics, and Arabs, the highest value lies in interpersonal relationships.⁴ Self-worth is often determined by the quality of relationships and how the member is viewed by members of the same and other groups. Knowledge is most often gained by feeling or intuiting what lies behind appearances and superimposing this information onto what can be ascertained by the senses.

Perhaps Simon Peter's hospitality to this newcomer on the beach made space to create a relationship. When Jesus tells Simon Peter to put out into the deep and let down the nets, Jesus is commanding Simon Peter to do a specific, definite action. It was to be done immediately and one time. These instructions are only for Simon Peter. It was not a suggestion or a recommendation. When Jesus *says* to Simon Peter to put out into the deep and let down your nets, the word is *eipen*. When Simon Peter *says* to Jesus "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything" the word is *eipen* again. But when Simon Peter responds to Jesus's command "Yet if you *say* so," it is a different word, from the root word *rhēma*, commonly used in the New Testament when the Lord is speaking his dynamic, living word to instill faith. Simon Peter acknowledges Jesus's words have an element of authority, precision, and clarity that resonates. Simon Peter's obedient response, despite any discouragement he felt from a night-long frustration with no catch, is because he recognized the authority of the word of Jesus.⁵ They were life-giving words that instilled a faith and trust in him. The exchange between Jesus and Simon Peter is an example of hospitality and relationship building.

Jesus asks Simon Peter to go out into the deep. Often the deep is interpreted as chaos, the unknown, spiritual darkness, disorder, danger, unproductive effort or work. But other interpretations are fullness, immensity; an extreme degree; immeasurable insight, infinite knowledge or, incomprehensible plans. Howard Thurman writes about the experience of one of his students who was a deep sea diver in the prologue of his book, *The Luminous Darkness*:

"Enroute to the floor of the ocean the diver first passes through the "belt of fishes." This is a wide band of light reflected from the surface of the sea. From this area he moves to a depth of water that cannot be penetrated by light above the surface. It is dark, foreboding, and eerie. The diver's immediate reaction is apt to be one of fear and sometimes a sudden spasm of panic that soon passes. As he drops deeper and deeper into the abyss, slowly his eyes begin to pick up the luminous quality of the darkness; what was once fear is relaxed and he moves into the lower regions with confidence and peculiar vision."⁶

Jesus invited Simon Peter to go deep in order to show him in a tangible way his fullness, immeasurable insight, infinite resources, and incomprehensible plans. The catch draws attention to Jesus's power of prophetic discernment. Simon Peter's vision becomes perspective—he "sees" more than the fish.⁷ He "sees" with peculiar vision.

4 <http://www.ejnichols.org/about.html>.

5 John Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary Luke*, New Testament Library (Louisville Westminster John Knox, 2012), 125. Herman Hendrickx, *The Third Gospel for the Third World Volume Two* (Wilmington, Michael Glazier, 1999), 182.

6 Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (Richmond, IN: Friends, 1999), vii-viii.

7 Carroll, *Luke*, 125.



Katie Cannon and Paul Owens Parker at 2017 Union Presbyterian Seminary commencement.

Jesus did not ask Simon Peter to do anything he did not already know how to do. Often life-giving words are calls to do more of what one already knows how to do. Sometimes it is staying in the same place, occupation, job, church, or class but going deeper and trying something more challenging. Often ministry is a metaphor of our lives.

Pamela Cooper-White points out the ordinariness of a call. The disciples' call was not in a sacred holy place; it was at work, and work that was unproductive. In the midst of weariness and pessimism Jesus showed them something

amazing and new: a sign of holy abundance, a surplus of nourishment in the midst of seemingly barren waters.⁸ In womanist vernacular, Jesus “made a way out of no way.”

God does not wait until things are settled and still to call us. God finds us wherever we are, doing whatever we are doing and shows us something new, often with the very materials of our everyday lives and work. God uses the details of our particular time and place to catch our attention and call us into a new challenge.⁹

The challenge is to practice paying attention to the strange and the stranger because surprising messages do come virtually every day, and they may bear an unlikely holy word in answer to the weary question, “Is this all there is?” Hospitality creates space for voices to be heard, change to take place, and eyes to see with peculiar vision.

This article is dedicated to Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon who practiced hospitality every day.

8 Pamela Cooper White, *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 1 Chapters 1-11 Pastoral Perspective*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 124.

9 *Ibid.*, 126.

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