

Don't Miss the Boat
1 Corinthians 15: 1-11
Luke 5: 1-11

I'm in the middle of reading the latest little book by Mitch Albom. He's the man who wrote *Tuesdays With Morrie* and *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. The title of this one is *Have a Little Faith*.

Mitch Albom is Jewish and was brought up in a New Jersey suburb. I knew that much about him going in. In *Have a Little Faith*, Albom interviews Albert Lewis, the rabbi who served the synagogue that his family attended during his childhood. Lewis has asked Albom to write his eulogy, even though he is not yet near death. And in order to get to know him better, Albom pays his old rabbi regular visits over several years, much as he did with his old professor, Morrie.

Have a Little Faith is an exploration. Through these interviews with Lewis, and the parallel story of an evangelical preacher, Albom reaches deep into theology: that is, the meaning and purpose of life; the loss of belief and finding it again; the call to service in God's name; and the value of a community of faith.

This is a good little book. I'm on page 132.

But it was on page 67 that it became for me a great little book. On page 67, I learned that Albert Lewis was the rabbi in a synagogue in Haddon Heights, New Jersey, in Camden County. He arrived there in 1948 and served that same congregation his whole career. When I read that, suddenly this little book became very personal.

I grew up in Haddon Heights, New Jersey 08035. My father was still finishing building our house at 324 Crest Avenue when we moved into it in 1947. I was almost two. I lived there my whole life, until I went away to

college. It's not a very big town. Maybe my father knew Lewis; maybe he knew my father.

And to think – this wise rabbi was living and ministering there all the while I was growing up. While I was going to Sunday school and eating ham dinners and singing in the youth choir in the Methodist Church at 7th Avenue and Garden Street, Albert Lewis was reading and teaching the Torah at Temple Beth Sholom on Kings Highway and Green. On the great sea of religion, he was sailing a ship of faith while I was paddling a dinghy.

So now, I feel invested in Mitch Albom's book. And I am paying careful attention to what the rabbi Albert Lewis has to say as he speaks about the essentials of life and faith. For we are on the same sea – we are all on the same sea – and we all have the same heavenly Father.

As I lay my experience with Mitch Albom's book alongside our scripture readings for today, two ideas emerge.

The first is that Jesus lives where you and I live. Jesus lives where you and I are growing up – in faith.

The first disciples made their living as fishermen. For them, then, Jesus becomes a fisherman too. Jesus knows the water, he knows fishing. See him step easily into their boat and head out. He knows to sit down so as not to throw the boat off balance. (even though Jesus is always throwing us off balance). Here, as elsewhere, he teaches the people who are gathered to hear him. The onshore breeze carries his voice. Lesson over, he takes the disciples out further...to fish again. He knows where the great catch will be: and they *caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break*. Isn't it interesting, though, that when they get back to shore, they don't even bother to unload the fish? They simply left everything and followed Jesus.

Jesus indeed lives where we live. Jesus involves himself in our livelihoods, in our well-being, so that we will make a personal investment in him and in his way.

The second idea is that as Jesus takes his disciples well out onto the sea, he is actually leading them into the deep waters of faith. Here they learn trust: *“Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet, if you say so, I will let down the nets.”* Here they come face to face with God and realize their own sinfulness. The miracle of the great catch somehow reveals Jesus’ divine nature: ...when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, *“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”* Here they learn they must respond to God’s call upon their lives and so it is that when they get back to shore, they will drop everything and follow Jesus.

The deep water, of course, is a metaphor for deep thinking and for a deep understanding in one’s heart of the essentials of faith: the meaning and purpose of life; the loss of belief and the finding of it again; the call to service in God’s name; and the value of a community of faith.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul offers an account of a similar experience. Paul was a most unlikely apostle. Trained as a Pharisee, he persecuted the believers in the early church. But Jesus appeared to Paul in that famous scene on the road to Damascus, piercing him with a miracle of light and truth. Jesus led Paul into some deep waters of faith, so that Paul, like those first disciples, dropped all that he had been doing in order to follow way of Christ.

And here he is now, reminding the Corinthians of the essentials that he has come to understand in the depths of his heart: *For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to*

Cephas and then to the twelve.. Last of all, he appeared to me...I am the least of the apostles...But by the grace of God I am what I am.

Jesus lives where we live and Jesus takes us deep into our relationship with God, who is our heavenly Father.

Mitch Albom's book *Have a Little Faith* is studded with excerpts from Rabbi Albert Lewis's sermons. At the end of one on page 93, he reminds us to focus on the essentials of our faith, which - God promises - will sustain us in difficult times. Lewis writes:

“My friends, if we tend to the things that are important in life, if we are right with those we love and behave in line with our faith, our lives will not be cursed with the aching throb of unfulfilled business. Our words will always be sincere, our embraces will be tight. We will never wallow in the agony of ‘I could have, I should have.’ We can sleep in a storm...” (Albom 93)

The essentials of the Christian religion differ in many ways from the essentials of the Jewish religion. We know that going in. But I think the essentials of the faith are the same – for we are all on the same theological sea, we are all in deep water, we are all children of the same heavenly Father, who has promised to be with us. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, I pray this sermon. Amen.

Albom, Mitch. *Have a Little Faith*. New York: Hyperion, 2009.

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