Feast of St. Augustine of Canterbury
Rev. Jennifer Masada, Interview sermon at St. Augustine's Kapa'au, 3 July 2021
2 Corinthians 5:17–21, *Psalm 66:1–8*, *Luke 5:1–11*

Did you go fishing when you were little?

I grew up fishing with my Dad. We had a ritual of getting up before dawn and heading for the small lake just a few miles away.

When we arrive, the sky is magical, just beginning to lighten in the east. We find our way to our favorite spot on the shore where we know the morning light first hits the water. We prepare our fishing rods, adjusting the bobbers and weights. Dad opens the thermos of hot chocolate and pours me a cup. From a second thermos, he pours himself a cup of hot coffee.

Then we wait. Hot beverage in hand, we watch in silence as the sun rises.

When the first rays hit the surface of the water, we bait the hooks and cast out. Then we wait, watching the bobber for signs of a bite. Slowly the bobber drifts until it's time to reel it in. I move the reel slowly, tugging gently on the rod every now and then to make the bait move enticingly.

We sit for a long time, casting, watching, reeling in -- casting, watching, reeling in.

Dad would say, "Always fish where the fish are. We go to the fish; the fish don't come to us." So occasionally we move along the shore to different spots.

After a few hours, when the temperatures begin to climb, we move to a cliff where we can drop our lines into deep, cool water where the fish like to hang out when the sun has warmed the waters close to shore. Snacks. Snacks are important. Dad has packed some crackers and salami and some leftover rice to scoop up with seasoned nori.

We eat, fish, and chat quietly. The excitement of a bite causes us to break silence. "Set the hook!" "You've got it! Keep it up! Oh, you've got a good one! This one's a fighter!"

Mostly, though, we're quiet; it's enough to watch the bobber and enjoy the good things that come from fishing: time with each other, the quiet, the beauty of nature. Sometimes we caught lots of fish, other times just a few, and sometimes, none.

Dad would always say that enjoying the good things that come from fishing is what matters most. Looking back, I recognize that those "good things" were great life lessons. Fishing teaches us faith. The fish are there, even when you don't catch any. Fishing teaches us perseverance. Cast after cast, we keep going, knowing that with each toss of the line, we appreciate the good things: for me, that was time with my Dad, snacks, enjoyment of nature, and, oh yeah -- the possibility that I might actually reel in a fish.

In today's Gospel, Jesus says, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

The disciples have been fishing all day, only to come up empty handed. They are surprised, maybe even annoyed, when Jesus asks them to drop their nets once again. After all, they are experienced fishermen; they know the business of fishing, and today there is nothing to catch. The hard work of casting the nets again doesn't seem like a "good thing" after an entire day of empty net after empty net.

But they do it anyway. When the nets come up bulging with an enormous catch, they are astonished! Their astonishment quickly gives way to embarrassment and shame at having so little faith. But Jesus reassures them saying, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

What a curious thing to say. "From now on you will be catching people." What does Jesus mean?

Jesus is comparing the "good things" of fishing to the "good things" of spreading God's love. Imagine that the net is God's love. When we cast the net with FAITH in God's love, we "catch" people. Perhaps we don't catch every time. This is where faith is required. Sometimes we have to cast the net over and over, with faith that the people are there.

Faith, like fishing, is a practice that gets better and better the more we do it. Faith, like fishing, requires patience. It requires persistence. Faith, like fishing, can feed us in mind, body, and spirit as it teaches us to appreciate all the good things, not just good outcomes.

Today, we gather to celebrate the feast day of St. Augustine of Canterbury. I think St. Augustine had the spirit of a great fisherman. His story is one of faith, patience, humility, and persistence. But his story also includes times of struggle, times during which he found it difficult to have faith, to be patient, or to be persistent. Maybe this is the reason the writers of our lectionary chose this particular gospel story for his feast day. And maybe this is the reason the founders of this church chose St. Augustine as its namesake.

St. Augustine's journey was not easy. He was, at times, overcome with fear, doubt, and lack of faith.

Writers of a Franciscan blog about St. Augustine had this to say on his feast day this year: "Augustine of Canterbury comes across today as a very human saint, one who could suffer like many of us from a failure of nerve. For example, his first venture to England ended in a big U-turn back to Rome. He made mistakes and met failure in his peacemaking attempts with the Briton Christians. He often wrote to Rome for decisions on matters he could have decided on his own had he been more self-assured. Augustine's perseverance amidst obstacles and only partial success teaches today's apostles and pioneers to..." ...keep faith despite frustrations and gradual progress.

It's interesting to note that St. Augustine corresponded regularly with Pope Gregory, the one who sent Augustine to Britain. When Augustine failed to convince the Britons to give up Celtic customs and pagan rites, he wrote to Gregory, greatly distressed. Gregory encouraged him to be patient, and even counseled him to embrace the enriching diversity of local customs, pagan rites, and festivals. Gregory writes, "If you have found customs, whether in the Roman, Gallican, or any other churches that may be more acceptable to God, I wish you to make a careful selection of them, and teach the church of the English, which is still young in the faith, whatever you can profitably learn from the various churches.

For things should not be loved for the sake of places, but places for the sake of good things." *For things should not be loved for the sake of places, but places for the sake of good things.*

There are many ways to think about the story of St. Augustine; some involving the hard truths of the church wielding economic power, its undeniable role in colonialism, and the fine line between embracing a culture and appropriating it. It's a complex history—but one that also bears positive messages.

As this parish of St. Augustine's envisions the future, I hear a hopeful and empowering message in Augustine's story and in the Gospel lesson for his feast day. Cast your nets wide. St. Augustine cast the net wide, traveling all the way to a remote island to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. He cast the net wide when he heeded the urgings of Gregory to include the good things of the local community, to include the good and diverse spiritual practices that would enrich the emerging Christian faith in Britain. In his actions, Augustine was essentially saying "all who seek God are welcome at this table. God of the infinite, your love knows no bounds."

Your church profile reflects this beautifully. St. Augustine's already follows the example of its namesake, casting wide the net of God's love in the Kohala community.

Moving forward, how can St. Augustine's continue this good work in ways that are meaningful to those who don't yet know us? Envisioning the future with excitement starts with affirming the good things about this place and the good things about Kohala. How is God already at work in the community? What are the "good things" this church is doing? What are the "good things" happening in Kohala? And how can this church connect with those "good things?" What good projects are underway where you see God's love at work? How could St. Augustine's become involved?

Cast your nets wide. This is a message of discipleship and inclusion. Go where the "fish" are, where the people are. Remember that Jesus doesn't say, "Go to church." Jesus says, "Follow me in the way of love."

There can be such excitement in taking the good things of St. Augustine's out into the community. That doesn't mean we stop inviting people to this place. It's a both/and. Bring people here, AND take the church to meet people where they are. Engage in God's work that's already blossoming in Kohala. Have faith that doing God's work in the community will have a positive effect, both on the community and on St. Augustine's. Be patiently persistent, like St. Augustine. Be authentic. Be faithful. Be creative and courageous in stepping out to collaborate to nurture God's love and be Christ's body in the world.

When I was with you on Pentecost, I shared a reflection about the positive power of the Holy Spirit working in and through us with a passage from Ephesians 3:20,21: "Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever."

Let's open to God's power working in us. Let's allow God's imagination to ignite our service and devotion to ourselves, our community, our knowing of the Spirit of Christ living here in this place. Let's celebrate the good things of St. Augustine's and share them; let's continue to see the good things in Kohala—in all its wondrous diversity—and continue to embrace them. As Kohala changes, let's learn how people's needs are changing. Let's go to where the people are and share in ways that they can receive. Let's envision fruitful partnerships that spread God's boundless love.

With God's help, let's cast the net wide. Amen.

22 Pentecost Year A - Track 1 - 25 October 2026
Jennifer Masada - St. Augustine's Episcopal Church - Kapa'au, HI
Deuteronomy 34:1-12, *Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17*, *1 Thessalonians 2:1-8*, *Matthew 22:34-46*

What does it mean to love? Why is love so beautiful and also so challenging? Perhaps it is because sometimes we feel we do not really **have** love. We try to keep it, own it, preserve it, contain it. We **seek** love when in reality we already **are** love.

Maybe this is part of what Jesus is trying to show the Pharisees in today's Gospel. They come to him asking "what is God's greatest commandment." Perhaps they hope to catch him in an answer they can dispute. Jesus responds with words from their own sacred tradition: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." And then he adds, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments, he says, hang all the law and the prophets.

Then, as he did in the temple marketplace, Jesus turns the tables by asking his interrogators a question of his own. "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" Based on their understanding of scripture and tradition, the Pharisees answer with certainty: "The son of David."

Quoting from Psalm 110, Jesus asks, "Then why does David call the Messiah Lord? If the Messiah is David's descendant, how can David also call him Lord?" Suddenly, the answer that seemed so obvious becomes something much more mysterious. The Pharisees have no answer, and the conversation ends.

So we have a Gospel story in two parts. First, Jesus declares that the greatest commandment is love. Then he presents a riddle that challenges the Pharisees' understanding of the Messiah.

What do these two conversations have to do with each other? Perhaps Jesus is urging them, and us, to **think bigger. Think bigger about love. Think bigger about God.**

We have our ideas about who God is, how God works, and what it means to love. We construct beliefs and expectations that help us make sense of the world. But sometimes we become so attached to our understanding that we have trouble seeing beyond it. God is greater than anything we can imagine, and love is larger than any definition we can give it. Perhaps Jesus is inviting us to become curious about what lies beyond the boundaries of what we think we know.

Both love and God are bigger than the little containers we put them in. Love is more than an identity, more than laying claim to a relationship. It is more than the actions we take or the words we say.

Imagine with me: how should we love God? Should we build altars? Give a lot of money? Come to church? Follow all God's commandments? **What constitutes wholehearted love for God?** And how should we love our neighbor? **What does love actually look like in our everyday lives?**

I remember when our boys were little. As all little ones do, they would ask for things. Sometimes I would say, “Yes!” Other times, I would say, “No.” And when the answer was no, their next question was almost always, “Why??” Kirk and I would offer various explanations, all of which boiled down to “Because we love you.”

Love eclipses the “yes” and the “no.” Love pours out through every moment and every aspect of the relationship between parent and child. It isn't contained in any single answer or decision. It is the foundation of the relationship itself.

It's interesting that we don't usually ask “why” when we get what we want! We might express gratitude, but generally we're happy to accept the “yes.” But when things don't turn out as expected, we want an explanation.

Think about this in terms of our prayer life. When our prayers seem to go unanswered, when life unfolds in ways we cannot understand, our relationship with God can be tested. We wonder where God is, whether God is listening, whether the love we trusted is really there.

Of course, we cannot assume that every disappointment is God saying “no” for reasons we will someday understand. But perhaps this comparison helps us recognize how easily we measure love by whether our expectations are met. When we don't understand what is happening, we may begin to question the relationship itself.

The commandment is to love God. But how? We cannot see God or fully comprehend the mystery of the Divine. But we **can** enter into relationship. We can ask questions, wrestle with doubts, express frustration, and remain open to discovering something new. Through our willingness to remain in relationship, we begin to recognize Divine love in ways we never imagined.

And if we can imagine loving God in this way, surely we can imagine loving our neighbor! Love is bigger than our expectations of one another, bigger than the trouble and difficulty we experience when trying to love. Sometimes love says yes. Sometimes love says no. Sometimes love asks us to listen, to change, to forgive, or to establish a boundary. The expression of love may change, but love itself is larger than any one of those expressions.

Perhaps this is where the idea of sacrifice comes in. We often think of sacrifice as giving something up or enduring suffering.

But the Hebrew word *korban*, often translated as sacrifice or offering, comes from a root meaning “**to draw near.**” A way of approaching God, of entering more deeply into relationship with the Divine.

What might we have to set aside, or sacrifice, in order to draw nearer to God? Perhaps some of our expectations, our assumptions, even our certainty about what we believe. Perhaps we need to loosen our grip on the little containers we've constructed for God and love, making room for something greater than we can imagine.

Think about the Pharisees. Jesus challenged them to imagine a Messiah who would surpass their expectations. What would they have to surrender in order to consider something beyond what they thought they knew?

And what about us? What might we need to set aside to recognize the love already present within us and all around us?

We often talk about the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. But perhaps even the cross invites us to think bigger about love.

Imagine its two intersecting lines. The vertical line connects us with God, with the heavens above and the ʻāina beneath our feet. It reminds us that we are part of creation, grounded in the earth, with the Divine present within and around us. The horizontal line reaches outward, connecting us with our neighbors, with all who share this journey.

And where do these lines meet? They meet at the center of the cross, at the center of ourselves, in our hearts, **where our love of God and our love of neighbor become one.**

We see this symbol, the cross, in our church. We embody it every time we make the sign of the cross. It reminds us that the love revealed through Christ is bigger than any single act, perhaps even bigger than the offering of love Jesus made. Because his offering depends on our sharing of it!

Amen.

It is a love that continues to live and move through us, shaping our relationships and expanding our understanding of what it means to love. **Love is so much bigger than we imagine. And so is God.**

Perhaps we spend so much of our lives searching for love because we have forgotten that love is already part of who we are. Just as we have been saying during this season of creation, we cannot contain it, own it, or preserve it for ourselves. But we can recognize it, nurture it, and allow it to flow freely through our relationships with God, with our neighbors, and with ourselves.