Sunday, March 5, 1972
CATCHING FISH
Luke 5:1-11

Jesus must've really made an impression on Simon Peter! Otherwise, how can the fact be explained that Jesus, a carpenter, and teacher, with little or no experience at fishing, gives advice to fishermen like Peter about where to fish, and they follow his direction. That's a miracle in itself, and the further miracle is that they caught some fish, in fact, so many that they nets were about to break! Some of us probably wish we had that kind of advice and direction in our fishing.

But what deeper meaning does this story have for us in our own living? Arid before we look at that, why did the Biblical writers remember a story like this and write it down?

Stories like this one were remembered and written down because they provide a setting for a saying of Jesus-- they are "prophetic miracles." They are like parables acted out which teach and help us remember something. This particular story of the large catch of fish is connected with the calling of the 12 disciples. Un-doubtedly as Jesus was beginning his public ministry, he made friends with a number of men and women. In fact, many of his 12 disciples probably knew him as a friend before they became full-·fledged followers. I suppose that at first, they remained at home and kept up their business and usual occupation and saw Jesus only from time to time.

For example, Luke reports that early in his ministry Jesus was visiting at the home of Simon Peter and that he cured Peter's mother-in-law of a very high fever. This was probably before Peter was one of his full-time disciples.

In other words, we can_ assume that most of the disciples came to be with Jesus in three stages: (1) first a friend-ship with Jesus; (2) then the call to following him: and (3) finally the call and decision to become full-time apostles, leaving their former occupations behind.

The story from Luke, which we just read probably took place with some of the disciples before they became 2. full-time followers, although they were at the time acquainted with him and impressed by him.

Jesus had been teaching and preaching near a lake where Peter and some of the others were carrying on their fishing business. As the crowd grew larger and as the people pressed close upon him, Jesus got into a boat which be-longed to Peter and asked him to go out a few feet from the shore so that he could teach and speak to the people from a better vantage point.

After Jesus had finished with his teaching, he told Peter to take the boat out into deeper water and let down the nets for a catch. Simon Peter reminded Jesus that they had been fishing the night before and had caught nothing. But, he said, because you've asked us, we'll do it. This time their nets caught more fish than they could handle.

Perhaps the healing miracles which Peter heard about and saw did not so much impress him, but now when Jesus spoke to Peter in his own terms, in terms of fish, in terms of his own business — something which Peter considered himself good at, that impressed him!

Peter was so overwhelmed that he was afraid — he was so astonished that he was not sure that he wanted anything to do with Jesus. But Jesus said in effect to Peter--"Don “t be afraid, this is only an example of the kind of effect you will have if you follow me and become a fisher of men. I’m going to put you to good use if you’ll follow me.” This was the clincher for Peter. At this point, he became a full-time follower of Jesus.

Years later, Peter and the others must’ve recalled this event with fond memories. Jesus told us to leave the shallow water and put out into the deep — we were at first reluctant to risk it for fear of failure=, but we did it and it changed our lives that day and thereafter.

Push your boat out further into deep water! When Peter and his friends left their fishing business for their new venture as disciples, they were truly launching out into the deep. They were leaving a business they knew very well, for something they did not know much about. They were leaving the safe shallow water near the shore and going where they did not know the outcome. This is a story of trust and risk. 3. Push your boat out further into deep wa.er! Like Simon Peter, we at first hesitate. It’s not always easy to do. We may fail and catch no fish. There are forces in all of us that want to pull back and stay in the shallow water near the shore — back to what we knew in the past as satisfying, safe and secure. Sometimes we want to stay back even though it isn’t satisfying — at least we think, it’s better than risking the unknown. When Moses led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, and after they had been living in the desert for a while, facing an unknown risky future — some of them said, “take us back to Egypt. Even to live in slavery and suffer is better than facing the risk of the future.” We know the feeling.

On the other hand, if we are open to risk, if we launch out into deep water, if we are open to growth, we can move to new frontiers, to the discovery of new powers and capacities. Instead of being status quoers, we can become self-actualizers, innovators, creative persons. We can catch fish we never knew were there. Instead of running from the world, we face it with con-fidence even though we may sometimes be afraid. The conflict between retreat and risk, between fear and trust, is a deep-seated part of our nature. Each one of us, all institutions too, feel pulled by both sides of that conflict.

The older we grow, the more our growth is determined by our own decisions. Over and over again we decide either to risk the possibilities of growth or to choose securities already achieved. Those who grow, like Peter and the others in this story, face their fear to risk, accept the pain, disappointment, and dangers· in growing, for the sake of the satisfactions to be achieved. They know that the death or abandonment of present good is often the doorway to future good and new life.

The status quoer decides against the inevitable risks of growth and chooses a way of life that can lead to his own diminishment and gradual personal death.

There come times to all of us when we are called to launch out into the deep. A person quits a secure job and takes on a new and risky venture. Getting married; having children; all of these things and more involve risk and trust and growth.

But this story of catching fish takes us even further! It is saying that whenever you and I entrust ourselves to God, we are putting out into the deep water. We don’t know for sure where it might lead us. There is always an element of mystery and the unknown about God, his ways, and the future. But there is an element, a large element of mystery and the unknown about life itself, the present and the future.

Worship at its best is an act of calling out into the deep as we try to relate ourselves to the infinite. There is a dimension of depth to all of life and to death itself. Life at its best is not just living in the safe shallows where we can always see the bottom and know where we are and what is there and what the future holds. Our patterned days are encompassed in mystery. Why were we born? For what purpose are we in life? What is beyond the limits of birth? What is beyond the limits of death? These questions haunt all of us!

We surround birth and death with what we call religious ceremonies. Dimly we realize that our world called “civilization” is still fed from hidden mountains and the vast sky.

More and more we are pushing our boats into deep water. What is beyond the range of our telescopes? What is beyond the limit of space? We do not always ask; often we prefer to live in the neat measurements or neater logic of the world. We try so to live, but we cannot. That is why we have telescopes. God calls us into the deep. We want to hold back, but yet the mystery draws us and attracts us.

We try to live life in the shallow water, so astrology flourishes: we surrender freedom to the supposed governance of some planet under which we were born. It would seem fairly clear that we are born under all of them, and under the beyond space. Our Christian faith says, “Nor height, nor depth shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This is much more than a story of catching fish. “When — . God calls us to push our boats further into deep water, we find God there and if we become aware of his mystery and power, like Simon Peter we worship. 5.

Peter said to Jesus, after the catch of fish in the deep water — "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.” He was saying — heretofore I thought I knew about everything, but I am just beginning to be aware of the mystery. There is much more to you, Jesus, than I at first thought.

That is why we worship, too. There is much more to you, Jesus, than we first realized. We worship, too, because there is a great gulf between our space and time and God’s beyond space and time.

We need the dimension of depth. Beyond our careful sciences and clever “ologies — m Mystery. Beyond our neon-lighted civilization and our biochemical explanations--mystery. Beyond the height of the sky and the depth of the mind — mystery.

A truly religious person is a growing person — one who launches out into the deep; one who is aware of mystery and the unexplainable and the unknown and finds in these neither an embarrassment nor a threat — but hope. A truly religious person does not have to be in control of everything, nor feel compelled to be all-knowing. Truly religious people find excitement in mystery and stand in adoration of goodness; They are capable of wonder and able to stand in awe of that which is beyond their comprehension. They have a sense of reverence for themselves, for other people, for issues with which they struggle, for the truth which they know, for the truth which they have yet to learn, and above all, for the Holy Other whom they call God, who stands over against them, above them, and beneath them as well.

Simon Peter, after the large catch of fish began to realize that he was in the presence of something greater than himself and he was ready for worship. Peter dis-covered the supernatural after catching fish!

Peter was discovering that God's signals are to be found at all kinds of places in this world. The dimension of depth is everywhere. How else can we explain the many things we do?

A child wakes up in the night, perhaps from a bad dream, and find himself surrounded by darkness, alone, afraid. 6. The child cries out for her mother. It is hardly an -exaggeration to say that, at this moment, the mother is — being invoked as a high priestess of protective order. It is she, and in many cases, she alone, who has the power to banish the chaos and to restore a feeling of safety to the child. She will take the child in her harms. She will turn on a lamp, perhaps, which will encircle the scene with a warm glow of reassuring light. She will speak or sing to the child, and the content of this communication will invariably be the same --"Don't be afraid — everything is in order, everything is all right" If all goes well, the child will be reassured, her trust in reality recovered, and in this trust the child will return to sleep.

We think this belongs to the most routine experiences of life, like catching fish, and does not depend upon any religious preconceptions. Yet this common scene raises a far from ordinary question which immediately introduces a religious dimension: Is the mother lying to the child? The answer, in the most profound sense, can be "no" only if there is some truth in the religious interpretation of human existence.

The mother is giving a profound statement of faith! She's giving a statement of cosmic hope! Have trust! Everything's going to be all right! She's making a religious statement. She's experiencing the dimension of depth.

Many times, young people will come to a church like this one for their marriage, even though they are not members of any church. When I ask them, why do you want a church wedding, a religious ceremony — their answer almost always implies that they sense a dimension of depth in marriage which needs to be symbolized in a concrete way. They realize there's more to marriage than marriage.

So, the story of "catching fish" is one which speaks to us of launching out into the deep in all of our living. It speaks of the awareness of the Infinite in our midst. Push your boats out into deeper water — it's a risk to be away from shore, but it is God who is calling you, and it is God who is there. Amen.