Sunday, February 6, 1983
GOING OUT INTO THE DEEP
Luke 5:1-11

The story just read is much more than an account of a fishing trip. As I have mentioned before, stories like this one were remembers and then written down because the disciples and the early church saw in them a deeper meaning. The story carries a message much like a parable.

This incident involving a large catch of fish is connected with the calling of the twelve disciples. Undoubtedly as Jesus was beginning his public ministry, he made friends with a number of men and women. In fact, many of his 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 high fever. This was probably before Peter was one of his full-time disciples.

We can assume that most of the disciples came to be with Jesus in three stages: (1) first, a friendship with him; (2) then the invitation to follow him; (3) third, the decision to become full-time followers, leaving their former occupations behind.

The story from Luke which we just read probably took place with some of the disciples before they became full-time followers, although they knew Jesus and were 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 belonged to Peter and asked him to go out a few feet from the short so that he could speak to the people from a better vantage point.

After Jesus had finished with his teaching, he told Peter to take the boat out in to 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.

Maybe the healing miracles which Peter had heard about and seen did not so much impress him, but now when Jesus spoke to Peter in his own terms, something Peter considered himself good at, that impressed him!

In fact, Peter was so surprised by the large catch of fish, so overwhelmed that he was afraid. This man Jesus was just too much for him. 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 and women. I'm going to put you to good use if you'll follow me." This was the turning point in Peter's life, and he made the decision to become a disciple.

Years later, Peter and the others must've recalled this story 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 changed our lives that day and forever."

“Go out into the deep!” When Peter and his friends left their fishing business for their new venture as disciples, they were truly going out into the deep. They were leaving a business they knew very well, for something they knew very little about. They were leaving the safe shallow water near the shore and going where they did not know the outcome. This is above all a story of trust and risk.

“Go out into the deep!” Like Simon Peter, we at first hesitate. It’s not always easy to do. It’s like leaving home for the first time. It’s like growing up and going away. 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 of security near the short; we want to stay where we know the outcome, where we feel safe and secure.

Sometimes we want to stay back even though we know it’s not going to be satisfying, but it’s better than risking the unknown. When Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt and out of slavery, after being in the wilderness for a time, facing an unknown future, some of them said — "take us back to Egypt and to slavery. It’s better to live in slavery and suffer than to face the risk of the unknown and freedom.”

We know the feeling. We are afraid to be free in so many ways. One person put it this way: “There is a locked-up potential in all of us that frequently remains locked up tight because we’ve sold our freedom as persons for the security of the system. We’re always tempted to give our soul over for safekeeping, to exchange our freedom for the security that might come from an infallible book, an infallible church, an infallible tradition, an infallible husband or wife, an infallible law.

On the other hand, if we are not afraid of freedom and risk; if we are open to it, if we launch out into the deep, 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 people. We can fetch fish we never knew were there.

Instead of running from the world, we face it with confidence 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 and trying something new, for the sake of the satisfactions to be achieved. They know that the death or abandonment of present good if 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 stagnation.

There come times to all of us when we are called to launch out into the deep. A person quits a secure job where he or she is bored and stagnant, where there is no room for growth, and takes on a new and risky venture that is filled with potential. That’s going out into the deep. All movement ahead involves risk, trust and growth.

This morning, the young people who are joining the church are “going out into the deep.” They don’t know all there is to know about the Christian faith, or all there is to know about God, or what living the Christian life will do for them — but they are making a decision, believing that to

choose the Christian way is the path to growth and development and a more meaningful life. It is one small step and throughout their lives, many, many more decisions will be required of them. And again, they will have to choose between security and freedom, between growth and stagnation.

But this story of going out into the deep takes us even further. It is saying that whenever you and I entrust ourselves to God, we are putting out into 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, God's ways 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 it is religion at tis best that reminds us of this and tries to relate us to the deeper things of life. Life at its best is not just living in the safe shallows where we can always see the bottom and know where we are. To believe we can even do that is an illusion.

All of us have within us a built-in desire to learn more, to develop, to grow, even though at times we stifle those impulses. Often, we prefer to live within the near measurements or neater logic of the world. We try so to live, but we cannot. That is why we have telescopes. That is why we probe the innermost parts of the atom. God calls us into the deep. We want to hold back, but yet the mystery draws us and attracts us.

Peter said to Jesus, after the large 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 everything, but I am now just beginning to be aware of mystery. There is much more to you and to life than I at first thought."

That is why we worship too. There is so much more to God and this creation and our life than we realize. There is a dimension of depth and of mystery in life that can only be satisfied by religious faith and worship.

A truly religious person is not afraid of the deep things of life. He or she is not afraid of going out into the deep; he or she is aware of mystery and the unexplainable and find in these neither an embarrassment nor a threat — but hope. A truly religious person is a growing person — one who is open to new ideas and new explanations and also one to distrust only simple answers.

Truly religious people find excitement in mystery and stand in awe. They are capable of wonder and adoration of goodness. 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 we call God.

Simon Peter, after the large catch of fish began to realize that he was in the presence of something greater than himself when he was with Jesus. He discovered that God's signals are to be found in many places in this world. The dimension of depth is everywhere. There are signals of transcendence all around us and within us.

Many times, young people and older 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 is needed in their marriage which needs to be symbolized in a concrete way. They realize deep down even though they don't understand it, that there's more

to marriage than just living together. They are going out into the deep and they want God with them.

In the same way, when couples begin having children and experience the miracle of birth and new life, a dimension of depth is experience like nothing in their life before. And then many bring the child to be baptized or dedicated. A religious ceremony is used to express their awe and thankfulness as they launch out into the deep with the new responsibility of taking care of a new human being.

So, this story of catching fish and going out into the deep tells us to not be afraid when God calls us into new ventures and new decisions. There's no need to be afraid of the dimension of depth when God is with you. Amen.