Sunday, February 9, 1992
ON NOT BEING AFRAID OF THE DEEP
Luke 5:1-11

It was the pivotal turning point in their lives. They never forgot the incident. Up to this point, these fishermen had known Jesus as a friend, someone they saw from time to time. He had been a guest in their homes. They had heard him speak to small and large groups of people. One day, when he had been visiting in the home of Simon Peter, Jesus had healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law of a high fever. But until that moment, these fishermen had never considered becoming full-time committed followers. After all, they were not deeply religious people.

Sure, listening to Jesus gave them a new understanding of God and the tradition in which they had been raised. But it had never entered their minds that they would one day leave the fishing business and become the leaders of the early church.

Then it happened. They had been fishing all night and caught nothing. Now it was morning, and they were cleaning their nets. Along the same shoreline, Jesus had been teaching, and the crowds were pressing in on him. He needed some space. What a wonderful coincidence. Here were his fishermen friends. He could get into one of their boats and use that as a teaching platform. So Jesus got into Simon Peter's fishing boat and asked him to pull away from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from there.

When Jesus had finished teaching, he asked Peter to take the boat into deeper water and let out the nets for a catch. We can imagine Peter's astonishment. They had been fishing all night and had caught nothing. And that's exactly what Peter said to Jesus. "You want us to try again? We've been fishing all night and most of the morning, and we've got nothing to show for all our work." I know that feeling, and I'm sure you do too. Many times it has seemed to me that I've put forth my best effort, yet nothing has been accomplished.

Yet we have to give Peter credit for being willing to try again. He said to Jesus, "If you say so, I will go out into deeper water and let down the nets." What a surprise! This time the nets caught more fish than they could handle.

Simon Peter was so overwhelmed by the large catch of fish, so impressed, that he was filled with awe and wonder. He had a whole new understanding of the authority of Jesus. It was a turning point for him and for his friends who were fishermen. Jesus then invited these men to become his full-time disciples, and now they accepted.

Years later, Simon Peter and the others who were fishing with him that day must have recalled this incident again and again because they remembered it as the crucial turning point in their lives.

I can hear them saying to each other, "Jesus invited us to leave the shallow water and launch out into the deep. We were afraid of the deep, reluctant to risk it for fear of failure, but we did it, and it changed our lives forever."

They remembered the incident because of what it taught them. Jesus had done more than invite them to fish in deeper water; it was also an invitation to them for a deepening relationship with him and therefore with God.

“Go out into the deep.” When Peter and his friends left their fishing business for a whole new life, now 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. It was a venture of risk and faith.

When we are invited to go into the deep, aren’t we often afraid and reluctant? It’s not an easy thing to do. Do you remember the first time as a child when you spent the night away from your own home, your own bed, and away from your parents? That was going out into the deep. Or maybe you remember the first time you left home and went on your own as a young adult. It’s not always easy. You could fail. There are forces in all of us that want to pull back and stay in the shallow, familiar water near the shore where we feel safe.

Sometimes we hesitate even though our place along the shore is not at all satisfying. As I said last Sunday, sometimes we prefer to be miserable rather than risk a new possibility.

In the Old Testament, when Moses led his people 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 back to slavery. At least there we knew where our next meal was coming from. It’s better to live in slavery than to suffer the risk of freedom and the unknown.” Some of the people who lived under the brutal communist dictatorship in the former Soviet Union are now saying something like that.

Going out into the deep, where we cannot see or touch the bottom, is fearful and risky.

We know the feeling. We are afraid of the deep in so many ways. Some people are afraid of a deep relationship with God. They want it, yet they don’t want it. Some people are afraid of joy. Some people are afraid of having fun in life. Some are afraid of deep human relationships, afraid to have close friends. Others are fearful of the deep relationship that a successful marriage requires.

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 familiar. We’re always tempted to give our soul over for safekeeping, to exchange our freedom for the security that might come from a seemingly infallible book, an infallible church, an infallible tradition, an infallible husband or wife, an infallible leader, or an infallible law.”

On the other hand, if we are not afraid of the deep, 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 grow, open to new ideas and new possibilities, it is then that we move forward to new frontiers. Then we discover new powers and capacities. Instead of being status quo, we become self-actualizers, innovators, and creative people. By not being afraid of the deep, we can catch fish we never knew were there before.

One of the most inspiring stories of risk, of not being afraid of the deep, which I’ve read recently, is told by Barry Neil Kaufman in his book “Son-Rise.” It was a turning point in the life of Barry, his wife, and their family.

Their third child and first son had been diagnosed at eighteen months of age as suffering from a supposedly incurable neurological and brain disorder called autism. He spent his waking hours spinning in circles, rocking back and forth, flapping his fingers in front of his eyes, and making an endless series of strange, sometimes eerie, sounds. Inanimate objects such as wood blocks, shoelaces, crinkled paper, and dinner plates consumed his attention hypnotically, leaving his world devoid of sustained and intimate human contact. When his parents held him in their arms, he became limp, dangling lifelessly like a rag doll. He never looked at his parents. They stood outside his silent, alien universe, wanting passionately to find the doorway in.

Physicians and neuropsychologists shook their heads with sympathy. All the experts declared the situation unchangeable. According to their prognosis, he would never communicate normally and would be lost forever behind a wall of bizarre and potentially self-destructive behaviors.

The parents turned to a deepening relationship with God and drew upon that connection in order to understand and find inspiration to deal with this challenging, mystifying, and traumatic illness that had engulfed their son.

Then they defied both the medical and educational professionals who deemed their son hopeless and took the first steps into the deep, into designing their own home-based program for their special child.

They decided to be happy with their son, and rather than push him to come to them and conform to their world (which appeared outside of his capability), they joined him in his. Since they did not judge his autistic behaviors as “bad” or “sick” but saw them as the best he could do for now, they used them as vehicles to communicate acceptance and to teach him about the world. When he rocked, they rocked with him. When he flapped his fingers, they flapped theirs. When he spun plates on the floor, they spun plates with him. When he emitted high-pitched, warbling screeches, they learned his song and tried to sing it with him. They did not merely imitate him; they joined him fully, with great sincerity and enthusiasm.

They turned their lives upside down. They altered the rooms in their home to accommodate the program and radically changed every family member’s routine, balancing their work with their son carefully with special times set aside to nurture their young daughters. In turn, the daughters joined the efforts and became teachers for their brother.

Every day became another opportunity to recommit themselves to this journey into the deep. By taking thousands of painstakingly tiny steps with him, they taught him how to speak, interact with people, and master self-help skills that other children learn easily and quickly on their own.

After working with him every day for over three years, this mute, severely retarded, under 30 I.Q. autistic child blossomed into a highly verbal, extroverted, expressive, and loving youngster who bore absolutely no traces of his original condition. The young man went on to display a near-genius I.Q. and maintained an almost straight-A academic average in both grade school and high school, graduating with honors. Currently, he attends one of the finest universities in the country, loves tennis, volleyball, and cross-country skiing, and possesses an unending curiosity, wit, and laughter. When we accept God’s invitation into the deep things of life, it can lead to a whole new dimension in our living. Miracles happen. We discover a completely new and profound foundation for our life.

All of us, from time to time, are called out into the deep, which can carry with it, if we allow it, a deepening relationship with God. A person quits a secure job where they are bored or stagnant, where there is no room for growth, and takes on a new venture that is filled with potential. That is going out into the deep.

Being faced with a serious illness in our own life or in the life of a family member or friend can be going out into the deep, where the future is unknown.

Worship, at its best, is an act of going out into the deep as we experience the loving presence of an infinite and holy God. There is a dimension of depth to all of life, and religion, at its best, calls us into the deep and helps us not to be afraid to deal with the deeper things in life.

We have built within us, as a gift from God, a longing for the deep. It is best expressed in our desire to learn more, to not be afraid of new questions and new knowledge. That is why human beings invented telescopes and microscopes. We want to explore the outermost parts of the universe and the innermost secrets of the molecule and atom. God calls us into the deep. Our search for truth is going into the deep.

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, “I’m afraid. I thought I knew everything, but now I see that I don’t. There’s a lot more mystery than I ever imagined.” Simon Peter, perhaps for the first time, was aware that he was in the presence of something greater than himself. That can be a mind-blowing experience.

Many times, couples who want to be married will come to a church like this one for their marriage, even though they are not active church members anywhere. When I ask them, “Why do you want a religious ceremony?” their answer almost always implies that they sense a dimension of depth is needed in their marriage because it is, at its best, a deep human relationship, and this can best be expressed in religious terms. They are going into something deep, and they want God with them.

In the same way, when couples experience the miracle of the birth of a child, they are in the presence of something greater than themselves. They are aware of a dimension of depth like nothing they have known before. That’s why many parents bring their child to be baptized. It’s a way of acknowledging God’s presence in this miracle.

Do not be afraid of the deep things in life. God is always there. Amen.