Sunday, February 8, 1998
MORE THAN A FISH STORY
Luke 5:1-11

Fish stories do not have a very good reputation. We apply the term to stories that are exaggerated and boastful. Similarly, we sometimes say to someone, “That sounds fishy to me,” meaning we are suspicious of what is being told to us. “How big was the fish you say you caught, but it got away?”

I’m not a fisherman myself, although I’ve tried it a few times with little success. But I’ve had enough experience to know that fishing involves depending on the unseen, being blessed or cursed by what is hidden in the waters. Strange things happen. Sometimes the fish disappear, and sometimes the mysterious water delivers up its bounty where none would have been expected.

Those who depend upon fishing for their livelihood know the contingency and fragility of life and fortune.

Although this little story from Luke’s gospel is, on the surface, a fish story, it is much more than that on another level.

Here’s what happened: Jesus had been teaching beside the lake, and the crowds kept closing in on him. Seeing two boats tied up at the shore, he got into one of them, which belonged to Simon Peter, and asked him to take it a few feet from the shore. Jesus then used the boat as his teaching platform.

When Jesus had finished teaching, he asked Peter to take the boat into deeper water and let down the nets for a catch. We can imagine Peter’s surprise. Peter and his partners had been fishing all the night before 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 have got nothing to show for our work.”

I know that feeling, and you do too. Many times, it has seemed to me, as it has to you, that I’ve put forth my best effort, yet nothing has been accomplished.

You 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 he and his partners could handle. Now they had a fish story to tell. Simon Peter was so overwhelmed by what happened that he was filled with awe and wonder. He had a completely new understanding of the authority of Jesus. It was a turning point for him and his friends who were with him.

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 earlier, when he had been visiting in the home of Simon Peter, Jesus had healed Peter’s mother-in-law of a high fever. But these people had never considered becoming full-time committed followers. They were not deeply religious people.

But now Jesus invited them to become his disciples, and they accepted. They would become fishers of people.

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 a 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 it was more than a fish story. Jesus had done more than invite them to fish in deeper water. It was 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 new life, they were going out into the deep in another way. They were leaving a business they knew very well for something about which they knew very little.

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.

Think about your own life. When you are invited to go out into the deep, to risk, to try something new, aren’t you 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 home, your own bed, your favorite pillow, 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? You could no longer depend on your parents’ financial support. It’s not always easy. You could fail. Or remember the time you started a whole new job or career? That was launching out into the deep. The promises marriage partners make to each other in the marriage ceremony are going out into the deep: “I promise to love and sustain you in the covenant of marriage from this day forward, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, as long as we both shall live.”

Many times, couples who want to be married will come to a church like this one for their wedding, even though they are not active members of any church. When I ask them, “Why do you want a religious ceremony?” their answer frequently suggests that they sense a dimension of depth in their coming marriage, and this can best be expressed in religious terms. They are going out into the 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 they have not 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 and the need for God’s guidance as new parents.

On the other hand, there are those who are so afraid of going out into the deep of marriage that they decide to live together without making any long-lasting commitment.

There are forces that want to pull us back and keep us in the shallow, safe, familiar water near the shore, where you feel safe, where there’s little or no risk of failure because you’ve made no commitment.

Sometimes you hesitate, even though your place along the shore is not all that satisfying. I know people who prefer to remain safe and miserable rather than risk a new possibility.

In the Old Testament story, when Moses led his people out of Egypt and 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. 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.”

Going out into the deep, where we cannot see the shore or touch the bottom, is fearful and risky, but it’s also filled with extraordinary possibilities and opportunities.

You know the feeling. People are afraid of the deep in so many ways. Some are afraid of a deep relationship with God. They want it, yet they don’t want it. Who knows where it might lead? Some people are afraid of joy, afraid of having fun in life. Others are afraid of deep human relationships, afraid to have close friends because of the suffering that has come from a previous broken relationship.

One person put it this way: “There is 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 willing to grow, to consider 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-quoers, we become self-actualizers, innovators, creative people. As I said in last week’s sermon, we live up to the image of God in which we are created.

One of the most inspiring stories of risk, of not being afraid of the deep, that I’ve read in recent years, is told by Barry Neil Kaufman in his book Son-Rise and repeated in his later book, Happiness Is a Choice.

Their third child and first son was diagnosed at 18 months of age with a supposedly incurable neurological and brain disorder called autism. This child 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 a 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 to understand and find inspiration to deal with this challenging, mystifying, and traumatic illness that had engulfed their son.

They then defied both the medical and educational professionals who considered their son hopeless and took the first steps into the deep, 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 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 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 sincerity and enthusiasm. They turned their lives upside down. Their 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, dysfunctional, 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., maintained an almost straight-A academic average in both grade school and high school, and graduated with honors. He attended one of the finest universities in the country, loves tennis, volleyball, and cross-country skiing, and has an unending curiosity, wit, and laughter.

When we accept God’s invitation to go out into the deep, it can bring forth miracles.

Worship is, at its best, an act of going out into the deep as we experience the loving presence of an infinite and holy God. Because we are created in God’s image, we have built within us a longing for the deep. It is 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 and take walks in space. We want to explore the outermost parts of creation and the innermost secrets of the atom. God calls us into the deep. Do not be afraid of the deep things of life. God is always there. Amen.