Sunday, February 4, 2001
GO OUT INTO THE DEEP
Luke 5:1-11

It was a pivotal turning point in their lives. They never forgot the incident. Heretofore, these fishermen had known Jesus as a friend, someone they were with from time to time. He had been a guest in their homes. They had heard him speak to small and large groups of people. They had witnessed his incredible love for people of every kind. He accepted people that others rejected. And they remembered when they had been visiting in the home of Simon Peter, that Jesus had healed Peter's mother-in-law of a high fever. But these fishermen had never considered becoming full-time committed followers. After all, they were not deeply religious people.

To be sure, listening to him had begun to give them a new understanding of God and the tradition in which they had been raised. But it never entered their minds that one day they would leave the fishing business and become leaders in a new religious movement.

According to Luke's gospel, here's how 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 point. So he got into Simon Peter's fishing boat and asked him to pull away from the shore to give him a little space. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from there.

When he had finished teaching, he asked Peter to take the boat into deeper water and let out the nets for a catch. You can imagine Peter's surprise. They had been fishing all night and had caught nothing, and they were experienced fishermen. 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 our effort." You know that feeling, and so do I. Many times, you put forth your best effort and nothing much has been accomplished. Someone suggests that you try again, and you wonder whether or not you want to face another disappointment.

I'm not a fisherman, although I've tried it a few times with little success. Maybe in my younger years, I didn't have enough patience. But I've had enough experience to know that to fish is to depend on the unseen, to be 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 expected it. Those who depend on fishing for their livelihood know the contingency and fragility of life and fortune.

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 the deeper water and let down the nets." Surprise! This time the nets caught more fish than they could handle.

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.

Peter and the others who were with him that day must've recalled this incident again and again, and they remembered it as a turning point in their lives. I can hear them saying to each other, "Jesus invited us to leave the shallow water and go 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 saw what had happened as a metaphor for their lives. They remembered the incident because of what it taught them about God and about life. Although this little story is on the surface a "fish" story, on another level it is much more than that. 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.

It was even more than that! Go out into the deep. When Peter and his friends left the 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.

I'm sure that there's not one person listening to this sermon who has not been asked to go out into the deep in one or more aspects of your life. When you are invited to go out into the deep, to do something you have never done before, to try a new job, or move to a new place, it's natural to be a little afraid and reluctant. Maybe you remember the first time as a child when you spent the night away from your home and without your parents. That was going out into the deep. Or perhaps you remember going away from home as a young adult to a college or university in another place. You could fail. There are forces within all of us that want to pull back and stay in the familiar, shallow water near the shore where we can see the bottom and feel safe.

Perhaps you recall being invited to try a new position in a totally new place where you had never lived before. You were being invited to go out into the deep. I remember when this church invited Jack Levick to become our minister of music and fine arts almost 29 years ago. He had never been west of Pennsylvania, so to come to Nebraska to live and work was going out into the deep. This is also true of many of our staff members.

Sometimes you might hesitate, even though your place along the shore is not that satisfying. You might even prefer to be a bit miserable rather than risk a new possibility. In the Old Testament story of Moses leading the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, after being in the wilderness for a time and 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." Moses could get the people out of Egypt, but it was more difficult to get Egypt out of them.

Going out into the deep where you cannot see or touch the bottom is fearful and risky. You can be afraid of the deep in so many different ways in your life. Some people are afraid of a deepening relationship with the Holy. They want it, yet don't want it. Who knows where it might lead? Some people are afraid of joy. They are afraid of having too much fun in life. There are those who are afraid of forming deep human relationships, afraid to have close friends. Others are afraid of the deep, committed relationship that a successful marriage requires. It's a scary promise you make in marriage. "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." That kind of going out into the deep is more risky than living together.

Many couples who want to be married will come to a church like this one for their marriage even though they are not active members of any church. When I ask them, “Why do you want your marriage ceremony to take place in a church using a religious ceremony rather than a secular one?” Their answers frequently suggest that they sense a dimension of depth in their coming marriage. They know they are taking a risk, going out into the deep, and this can best be expressed in religious terms. They want God with them.

In the same way, when many parents experience the birth of a child, they know they are in the presence of something holy, something greater than themselves. Having the responsibility of parenthood, whether by birth or adoption, and all that it entails is going out into the deep. 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 they go out into the deep.

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 frequently tempted to give our soul over for safekeeping, to exchange our freedom for the security that we think will come from an infallible book, an infallible church, an infallible tradition, an infallible leader, or an infallible law.”

For some, there is security in rigidity. They are afraid to color outside the lines. I read about a California zoo that moved to new and larger facilities that provided the animals with more room to roam. One rhinoceros, however, never adjusted to his more spacious environment. Even in his new quarters, this animal continued to walk around a small circle that measured the same dimensions of his old home. Perhaps there are some of you who, like this rigid rhino, resist breaking out of what you have always known, or how you have always thought. And so you remain in the same little circle because the unexplored territory of your imagination is too challenging for you.

What fosters rigidity, the fear of the deep? For starters, there is the mindset that there is only one “right” answer in any given situation. You might believe that what you see is all there is or that your solution is the only workable one. Add to that perfectionism, prejudice, judgmentalism, fear of change, and fear of failure. All these thoughts, feelings, and activities contribute to your not being willing to go out into the deep.

That unfortunate California rhinoceros could discover new delights in his surroundings if only he would move beyond his self-imposed boundaries.

On the other hand, the story from Luke’s gospel tells you that if you are not afraid of the deep, if you are not afraid of freedom and of risk, if you are open to it, and if the right person or cause is inviting you to be open to grow, open to new ideas and new possibilities, it is then that you move forward to new frontiers. Then you discover new powers and capacities. Instead of being a status quo person only, you become an innovator and a creative person. By not being afraid of the deep, you can catch fish you never knew were there.

Notice that I said, if the right person or cause is inviting you. There are times when the wrong person or wrong goal invites you to go out into the deep, to take a risk, and it’s a foolish one. The other night on one of those radio talk shows, I heard a woman tell the investment advisor about her loss of $5000. She had heard an ad by someone who said he had an almost risk-free way for her and other listeners to get rich quick. The first thing she and others had to do was to send him $5000. She did, and she never heard from him again. It was an invitation to

go out into the deep from the wrong kind of person and for the wrong reason. Her reason, she admitted, was greed.

The need for being cautious and not accepting some invitations because they might not be legitimate is understandable. We are not called by God to take foolish chances or to be greedy or irresponsible in our finances.

In addition to rigidity and fear of the deep, another thing that can hold you back from accepting the invitation to go out into the deep from the right kind of person or for the right reason is that you can have so many false beliefs about yourself. Those fishermen thought of themselves only as fishermen until Jesus invited them to consider other possibilities for the rest of their lives. I meet people all the time who think of themselves as being too old, or too young, or that they are not smart enough, good enough, or creative enough.

So today, let this little story from Luke's gospel be an invitation to you to go out into the deep. I cannot tell you where or what that "deep" might be for you. I do know that because you are created in God's image, you have built within you a desire for the deep. It is expressed in your 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.

I also know that there is within you, as in me, a hesitancy to go out into the deep, even at those times when you are invited to do so by someone you trust. If you're like me, you don't always like change. You don't mind when others need to grow, but when it's your turn, you tend to dig in and become resistant and a bit anxious.

What I do know for sure is this: when I am convinced that it is God calling me into the deep, I need not be afraid. God is always there. Amen.