Sunday, February 8, 2004
TIME TO GO FISHING
Luke 5:1-11

"Time to go fishing." That's what my dad would say to me and my brother every now and then after a long day's work in the fields during the summer. It was a way to relax in the shade on the bank of the small river as the sun was setting. We never caught very many fish, but we had fun. We had no fancy fishing equipment, only a bamboo pole with a string and a hook on the end.

"Time to go fishing." That's what Jesus said to some fishermen after he had used one of their fishing boats as a platform for teaching the crowds on the shore. He had been teaching by the lake.

"Time to go fishing. Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch," he said to the owners of the boat he had been using. But they had been fishing all night and had caught nothing. They were tired and depressed. They had spent the day cleaning and repairing their nets and listening to Jesus teach. What they needed was a good night's sleep, and that, in effect, is what they told him.

I can sympathize with these fishermen. Many times it has seemed to me that I've put forth my best effort and yet nothing has been accomplished. I want to go out into the deep. I'm sure you've had the same experience.

Even though Peter was reluctant, you have to give him credit for being willing to try once more. He said to Jesus, "If you say so, I will go out into the deeper water and let down the nets." He probably thought to himself, "I won't catch anything. It's a waste of time." What a surprise! He let down the nets, and they were filled with fish — so full the nets started to break. Peter called to his partners in another boat to come and help. Now both boats were so filled with fish, they almost went under. What a fish story he now had to tell.

Peter was filled with awe, wonder, and fear. With Jesus, he had an experience of the "Holy." The abundance was too much for him. He didn't know how to handle it. He was accustomed to scarcity. He could understand a night of fishing with no luck, returning to shore empty. That had happened many times in the past. What was now difficult for him to accept was the fullness of life. What could it mean to have more fish than the boat could carry? That had never happened before. How could he explain it to himself and to others? How would you handle overflowing abundance?

It was a turning point in the life of Peter and the others with him. Heretofore, according to Luke's account, Jesus was 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. One day earlier, when he had been visiting in the home of Simon Peter, Jesus had healed his mother-in-law of a high fever. Up to this point, these fishermen had never considered becoming full-time, committed followers. They did not think of themselves as deeply religious people.

Now Jesus invited them to become his disciples, and they accepted. They would be "fishers of people." Years later, they would look back and recall this incident again and again, seeing it as a sign of the abundance of people they would help bring to God's kingdom. They would say 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, and it changed our lives forever. Instead of scarcity, we experienced God's abundance."

They remembered the incident because it was more than a "fish story." In inviting them to fish in deeper water, it was at the same time an invitation to them for a deepening relationship with Jesus and, therefore, with God.

"Put out into deeper water." When Peter and his friends left their fishing business for a new life, they were leaving something 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. The story is rich in symbolism.

Consider your life. When you are invited to go out into the deep, to risk, to try something new, haven't you sometimes been afraid and reluctant? It's not an easy course of action. Do you remember the first time as a child when you spent the night away from your home, your own bed, and away from your parents? That was going out into the deep — leaving the comfort of the familiar.

Or maybe you recall the first time you left home and were on your own as a young adult. You had your own apartment. You could no longer depend on your parent's financial support. It's not always easy. You could fail. Getting married is putting yourself in deeper water. The promises marriage partners make to each other in the marriage ceremony are not shallow water promises. "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." Those are deep promises. To avoid the deeper promises of the marriage covenant is to stay in shallow water.

There are many couples who come to this church to be married, even though they are not active members of this or any church. When I ask them, "Why do you want a religious ceremony in a church?" Their answer implies that they sense a dimension of depth, a sacredness in marriage, and this can best be expressed in religious terms. They sense they are going into deep water, and they want God with them.

When couples experience the miracle of the birth of a child, they know they are in the presence of something greater than themselves. They are out in the deep. That's why many parents, even those who do not consider themselves religious, bring their child to be baptized. It's a way of acknowledging God's presence in this miracle and the need for God's continued guidance as new parents.

When you start a new job or a new career, that's entering into deeper water.

Whenever you are invited to enter into deeper water, there are forces that want to pull you back. There is always the temptation to stay in the shallow, safe, familiar water near the shore, where there's little chance of failure because you've taken no risk; you've made no commitment.

There are those who hesitate to put out into deeper water even though their 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 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. At least there we knew where our next meal was coming from. It’s better to live in bondage than to suffer the risk of freedom and the unknown.”

People are afraid to go deep in so many ways. Some are afraid of a deeper relationship with God. They want it and don’t want it. Who knows where it could lead? I know people who are afraid of joy, afraid of having fun in life.

There are also individuals who are afraid of meaningful human relationships, afraid to have close friends because of the suffering that has come to them from a previous broken relationship.

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 afraid to take risks, preferring 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 you are not afraid of going into deep water, if you are not afraid of freedom and risk, if you are open to it, if you launch out into the deep, if you are willing to grow, to consider new ideas and new possibilities, then you move toward new opportunities. Then you discover new power and capacities. Instead of being a status quo person, you become an innovator, and you live up to the image of God in which you were created.

There is this note of caution: there will be times when the wrong person or wrong goal invites you to go out into the kind of deep that could lead you astray. Last week, I was listening to one of those radio talk programs on investments. The caller told the investment advisor about his loss of $5,000. He had heard an ad by someone who claimed to have an almost risk-free way to get rich quick. The first thing he had to do was to send $5,000 to an address. He sent the $5,000 and never heard from the man again. It was an invitation to go into deeper water from the wrong kind of person and for the wrong reason. The caller admitted that his motive was greed.

I’m not asking you to take foolish chances or to be greedy or irresponsible in your finances.

In addition to letting this little fishing story from Luke’s gospel be an invitation to you to go into deeper water, I cannot tell where or what that “deep” might be for you. The story, however, does give you some hints of how it could happen.

Someone asked me recently, as we were talking about this fishing story, “Why doesn’t God call people like that now?” She went on to say, “I have spent a good portion of my time sitting around and waiting for one of those miraculous calls — a voice or vision you just can’t ignore.”

My response to her went something like this: maybe you are missing God’s call not because it is so rare in today’s world, but because it is so commonplace. The experience that Peter and the others had that day came in and through an ordinary event. They were doing what they did every day — fishing. In the same way, Moses had an experience of the Holy when he was going about his regular work as a shepherd. That’s how it can happen for anyone. It can be in the midst of the ordinary that you experience the extraordinary presence of God. It can cause you to feel blessed.

Also, remember this: when you open yourself to the numerous possibilities that life presents to you, many times you will receive more than you ever imagined. This story tells you that the call of the Spirit is to surprising abundance, not necessarily in material things, but in the overwhelming abundance of the love of God.

There is a basic principle in the life of the Spirit that needs to be followed: whatever is received needs to be put to use for the good. Hoarding abundance, claiming it as something you deserve, gradually constricts the flow of grace and shuts down the spirit of generosity. Ultimately, you can only enjoy what you are willing to put to use so that everyone will benefit. Time to go fishing. I hope you will let this story from Luke's gospel be an invitation to you to not be afraid when God's Spirit invites you to go into deeper water. No one can tell you where or what that "deep" might be. I do know that because you are created in God's image, you have a built-in desire for the deep things in life. It is expressed in your yearning to learn more, to not be afraid of new questions and new knowledge, and of being compassionate.

The good news is this: when you are convinced that it is God's Holy Spirit inviting you into the deep, you need not be afraid. God's Spirit is always there. Amen.