

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Deep Water”

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Luke 5:1-11

*5*Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, *2*he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. *3*He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. *4*When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, ‘Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.’ *5*Simon answered, ‘Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.’ *6*When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. *7*So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. *8*But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!’ *9*For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; *10*and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.’ *11*When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Swimming would probably be near the top of my list of inadequacies. I am not a good swimmer. I do not like swimming. Oh, I have passed two swimming classes a long time ago, and to do that I had to swim from one end of a large pool to the other. I recall being quite at ease swimming in the shallow end of the pool. But when the instructor took us to the other end- the deep end, and made us dive into the mysterious dark blue water, then I was terrified. I succeeded, although today I do not wish to be in any situation in which I must put my ability to swim to the test.

I recall as a child going to the lake with my friends and my cousins. While everyone else seemed to relish in the joy of the event, I would have rather stayed home. Other than the opportunity to cool off in the refreshing water, swimming tended to remind me only of my failure to learn how to swim. The rest of the group swam out to the floating dock to laugh and play and have a great time. I stood and bobbed up and down in the shallow water near the shore. I didn’t dare move beyond where my feet could safely touch the bottom. I preferred the fixed, the safe, and the comfortable.

Deep water has always represented something frightening for me. It is darker and colder than the warm and secure waters near the shore. You can’t see the bottom of the lake in the deep water and even worse you can’t place your feet securely on the ground. In the shallow water the shore is but a few steps away. In the deep water the shore is a risk or two away. For me deep water represents things that are frightful-chaos and change and uncertainty.

The gospel of Luke today describes an incident early in the ministry of Jesus. In the gospel of John, a similar story occurs following Jesus' resurrection. So perhaps we are supposed to use this story of Jesus to preview what is to come later when he demonstrates his lordship over all creation and his defeat of the powers of darkness and death.

This is another fishing story. The season of Epiphany seems to be full of them. It is another story of calling. The season of Epiphany emphasizes them also. Jesus was teaching along the lakeshore and the crowd was pressing in to hear him. Things were so congested that he had to get in one of the boats docked there and put out to sea, continuing to preach from the water. While there he noticed some fishermen who seemed to be laboring without much success. He called upon them to leave the spot in which they had dropped their nets and to go into the deeper water to try their luck. Simon Peter wasn't thrilled with this idea. He and his companions have been fishing all night and they are exhausted.

Have you ever spent a lot of time putting something together without success or trying to repair something without accomplishment, only to have a loved one walk into the room and suggest you try an approach that you had already tried hours ago! Don't you just love those times? Smiles come real naturally, don't they? You are already frustrated and then someone suggest that you are also stupid. Peter might have felt just like that. You can almost hear what he was thinking! "We've already tried that Jesus! We've worked like dogs all night and we haven't caught a thing. How about you keep to religion and theology and we'll keep to fishing!" And going into the deeper water seems like a great idea. "Things are working in the shallow stuff so let's go out there where things are really over our heads!" Talk about something frightening and silly waste of time.

But Peter must have perceived something special about Jesus. There was some about his manner or his words that created faith. We don't know if he saw something holy or heard something sacred. If only for a moment, yet an important moment, the fishermen trusted in Jesus and moved out further into the lake, dropping their nets into the deep water. Surprise! The author of Luke says that they caught so many fish that they could barely drag the nets back into the boat. Simon Peter and the rest of the fisherman were amazed at what had happened. Jesus then told them, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will be catching people."

This sounds like such a simple story but it seems to me that something important is going on here. When Jesus asks the fishermen to take their boats out into the deeper water, what is he really asking? He knows they are tired. He knows they have labored all night. He knows that they have caught nothing for their efforts. By his request, he is asking them to trust him more. He is asking them to leave the shallow places of their lives and begin to explore the depths of faith. "Go out into the deep water," says Jesus. "Trust me and see what might happen." Suddenly Simon Peter and the others discover that this incident with Jesus is more about a lack of faith than a lack of fish.

I'm not sure I could have responded as Simon and the rest of the disciples did that day. There have been moments in my life when I am tired, worn-out by obligation and frustrated to the point of exhaustion by failure. I haven't caught any fish. I haven't received what I figure I deserve. Trying something again at which I have failed earlier isn't what I want to do. Adding the risk of deeper water to another attempt makes the

invitation even less enticing. At least the shallow waters of my routine are safe. The reliance upon my own skill and merit and goodness keeps my feet planted firmly on the bottom of the lake.

But instead Jesus calls us to step away from our comfort zone and cast our nets into the deeper waters of a new reality. Let go of our desire to control all things. Let go of our presumption that we can somehow earn God's favor. Let go of our obsession with proving ourselves in comparison to others. Let go of our fantasy that we can somehow spend all our days in tranquil shallow waters and still catch fish. Head out from shore a ways further. Let loose of that which keeps you in safe tether and take the risk of trusting in God. In those deeper waters we find that we won't necessarily get what we think we deserve but we will find that whatever we do receive will be a blessing. Fish for life in a place where wonder and faith can grow.

Soren Kirkegaard once wrote that God's call and comfort can in fact be found more easily in chaos, confusion and change. That may seem strange to us. But he said, "To be joyful out in 70,000 fathoms of water, many, many, miles from all human help, yes, that is something great." He inferred that swimming in the shallows in the company of the waders and the bobbers is not for the truly religious.

I recall a conversation with one of my parishioners at the Salt Lake City church. This took place as I was preparing to leave for Michigan and just a few weeks after she had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Peg was a wonderful woman, always working quietly behind the scenes to take care of someone else's need. She drove the blind across to their weekly reading club luncheons. She folded, addressed and mailed the church newsletter every month. She delivered the church's food contributions to the local food pantry regularly. Through it all she remained a very stoic person. A native New Englander, Peg wasn't comfortable sharing personal thoughts or feelings, perhaps seeing them as a window to her soul that she would just as soon keep closed. But on that day as we prepared to say goodbye, Peg said something that came to my mind as I read this Scripture lesson. After hearing her diagnosis she told me that she had spent all of her life in shallow water. Things for her had always been relatively calm and free from serious trouble. Life had been routine. She had never been one to risk. Now, Peg said, she would see what it would be like to swim in deeper water. How would she do? What would she find? I have a sense that in that deep water Peg learned more about herself and about the love of God as it enveloped her.

The famous explorer Sir Frances Drake is credited with a prayer that is several centuries old. It goes like this: "Disturb us Lord when we are too well pleased with ourselves; when our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little; when we have arrived safely because we sailed too close to shore."

It is never easy fishing with Jesus. To truly experience what he has to offer we must break the comfortable patterns by which we live. We must be challenged to sail further from shore. We must be encouraged to cast toward a greater vision. In the deep water is where we will find the need for Jesus. In the deep water is where we will find the faith to trust. In the deep water we will find not what we think we deserve, but that with which God's grace has blessed us.

