

February 7, 2010 – Fifth Sunday after Epiphany “Into the Deep”

Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

There is so much going on in this fascinating tale from the gospel of Luke that it's really quite difficult to know either where to begin or on what to focus. What we do know is that Jesus has moved both physically and chronologically from a place and time of rejection – one where his listeners were ready to throw him off the cliff for his controversial teaching – to a place where the crowds were so overwhelming and eager to hear him – he had to get into a boat and speak to them from a distance! How quickly situations change.

But there are several things going on in this story that almost scream for a sermon. There is the whole idea of awe and an accompanying sense of unworthiness as expressed by Simon Peter in his remark, “Go away from me Lord for I am a sinful man,” or as translated by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, “I'm a sinner and can't handle this holiness. Leave me to myself.” The focus here might be on repentance and the recognition that we ultimately look to God in humility so that we might discover our humanity and realize God's grace. Not a bad message, but not my focus today.

Another possibility would be to turn our attention to Jesus' challenge to cast their nets back into the water, after they had been doing just that unsuccessfully all night long, and **then** they catch so much fish their boats nearly sink. But that's not the end, after all **that**, they are so compelled by his teaching, they leave everything to follow him. A sermon on that topic might be to invite listeners to think about what we might be willing to walk away from in our allegiance to Jesus. Is the lure of this world so captivating that we couldn't possibly follow? Do our material possessions in actuality possess us? Viewed another way – do our responsibilities constrain us and stifle our faith?

There's a whole lot of walking away going on right now you know. Folks are walking away from their mortgages in historic numbers because they realize their houses have become a bad investment. I don't think that was the case in this story from Luke – but it presents fodder for another interesting sermon topic. But again, not one I'm going to follow.

The phrase that kept leaping out at me all week, and the one I'd like us to center on for the next few moments is the one that is on our bulletin covers today – “Into the deep.” I believe these words are so much more than a simple request of Jesus to move to another fishing spot. I believe this challenge is an important metaphor from the biblical text that may have had a gainful yield **then**, but has equal significance for us today. Jesus' words to “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch,” mean so much more than the simple act of fishing – and, I believe, so much more than evangelism – which most preachers tend to emphasize in this story.

Remember the situation – the context of the story – it is so important for our understanding today. These experienced fishermen have been working all night long.

They are tired and ready to call it a day. Figuring this time out was just one of those unfortunate runs. And so they began to wash their nets and chalk it up as the price you pay for being in a risky business – one where nature has far more control over your success than you do.

But Jesus challenges them to go out – **one more time** – to give it another go. The response to which is rather predictable. Are you nuts? We're tired? The fish aren't biting and we're done for the day. We're ready to go home. But something draws them out "into the deep" and when they respond to Jesus' challenge, the reward is overwhelming! They catch so many fish that they had to call for another boat and even then their boats nearly sank from the take. Who is this guy, the must have wondered? And how did **he** know where we ought to go? How does he know our business better than we do? Isn't he a carpenter?

Venturing out into the deep, their efforts were well rewarded and an obvious challenge for us would be to listen and go out – even when exhausted, for there is always someone or more than a few who need our attention, our care, and our love. There are so many that need to hear good news. That's certainly true, but, I think, there is more in these words – this challenge of inviting us into the deep – a challenge that, in this case, resulted in a tremendous success, but I wonder, "Is that the whole point of the story?"

Think, for a moment, about what is going on here. The invitation or request did not occur without a fair amount of resistance, skepticism and maybe even some fear. Going out into the deep, the unknown, that which is yet to be revealed, typically brings about **that** kind of response in us, doesn't it?

Let me try to put it in another – perhaps a more simple way. Staying with the symbol, going into deep water gives most of us all an element of pause. Even though I am a good swimmer and love to go into the ocean, I have a certain hesitancy when I swim way out into the deep. One of the challenges I enjoy is swimming out around the bouys that are several hundred yards off shore from most of the beaches in San Diego. It's a relatively simple challenge physically, but not one without some fear. I often think to myself – when I get most of the way out – "I don't really know what's down there." Well actually I do – and therein lies the fear. There are dolphins and sting rays, and there are sharks. Not many – but it only takes one, right? In short, going out into the deep has an element of adventure, but also the reality that I could get hurt in the process. Each time it's a risk and each time I feel I've cheated death, in a way, when I return to shore.

And so the metaphor is rather compelling. The invitation to put out into the deep for a catch – or for whatever reason – provides a sharp contrast to our human penchant for the predictable and the routine. We like to know what's going to happen – how things will turn out. But this is an invitation to venture into new ground or new depths. We are challenged to respond to the urgings of God that break into human lives. In the case of Simon Peter, and for us today, we are suddenly struck with the realization that the most

profound and significant experiences of God and life are rarely found in safe ways and places. Real discoveries are found – out in the deep.

When Peter heeds the invitation of Jesus he is surprised by a catch so huge that he had to seek assistance in order to bring it all in, but it's not the catch alone that overwhelms him. Peter realizes that the one who invited him is the manifestation of holiness – Jesus the Christ. He left it all behind in order that he might follow this call and claim upon his life. This would not be the last time Peter goes out into the deep.

We who seek to follow the living Christ are being called in the same manner even today. To come away from the predictable and the routine and to open ourselves to new possibilities – even the possibility of transformation. Such events or religious experiences rarely happen in shallow water where you can see everything and avoid any risk or possibility of getting hurt.

Venturing out “into the deep” is, I believe, an invitation to self – to recognize the sacred that is within you and to tap into the depth – the depth of your soul and discover or rediscover the holiness that is there. It is only upon embracing that holy sense of self that we can effectively embrace the holiness in the other. And that, I believe, is what Jesus was calling for in doing the work of evangelism.

Eastern religions use a form of greeting that, I think, is very appropriate given this understanding. Upon arrival and departure one bows to the other and offers the word “Namaste” which means quite simply – the sacred in me recognizes and honors the sacred in you. We might say it slightly differently. Using the language of **our** faith we might say, “I can love my neighbor as I love myself because I believe we are both children of God.

Today we participate in a holy meal and in so doing we honor ancient tradition in a contemporary context, but the reason is the same. Jesus invites us “into the deep” – the deep mystery of our faith, that in eating and drinking the bread and the cup we proclaim the life, death and resurrection of our Savior. We enter into holy mystery. We may sense resistance, perhaps some skepticism, we may even feel some bewilderment or fear. Nevertheless, you are invited. Come. Put out into the deep. Be open to that which is yet to be revealed. You just may discover something new about yourself. No matter what, I promise you, if you come with an open heart, God will reveal Godself to you in ways that you need if only for today.

Namaste! Amen!