

INTO THE DEEP WATER
Luke 5: 1-11

It is one of Luke's most charming stories. It narrates Jesus' morning walk along the lakeshore and his winsome words that attract a large crowd. Here there is no rejection-recall that not so successful inaugural sermon at his hometown synagogue. Here people hang on to his every word and press in upon him. So many people that Jesus asks the owner of a little fishing boat for assistance. Could he use his boat as a floating pulpit? And thus Peter, the outspoken fisherman, gets caught up in the ministry of Jesus.

From his perch in the boat, Jesus speaks to those on the shore and those wadding out into the water. Peter no doubt heard every word. When the sermon is finished, one would expect Jesus to be ferried back to land. But that is not what happens. Jesus then turns to Peter and asks him to do something very unexpected. "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch."

Now Peter and his partners James and John had been up all night and caught nothing. They were, in fact, in the process of washing their nets and hanging them up to dry. But Peter senses something magisterial about Jesus, someone worth listening to. Already Peter had seen the power of Jesus' words on the crowd. Now he feels that power himself. And so he says to this maritime preacher, "At your word I will let down the nets."

At this point, the preacher who offers a winning word becomes the miracle worker who commands the waters. The fish come out of nowhere and are now everywhere-the text says a "great shoal of fish" so huge they are about to break the nets. Peter calls for help from his partners who then launch their boat to haul in this immense catch of fish. Imagine the splashing, the shouts of astonishment, the celebration-a fisherman's dream come true! But there are so many fish that the two boats almost sink. This is success that is almost too good to be true or even safe!

At this point, many would see only dollar signs. Fish were their livelihood and doubtless they had never had such a catch before. Perhaps you could imagine hearing these words, "Jesus, could you go fishing with us every day?" But here the grandeur of Peter is evident. With fish flopping and the boats almost sinking, Peter falls at the knees of Jesus and cries out, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Peter realizes that this is not just good fortune. This is a manifestation of God's power and majesty. Jesus commands and the lake offers up her bounty.

Peter realizes he is in the presence of the Holy and so he confesses his unworthiness. We are reminded of Isaiah who sees the Lord high and lifted up in

the temple and he too cries out, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips.” In the presence of holiness we are all frightened and undone.

It is here that Jesus lifts up Peter with these stunning words, “Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching humans.” Now it should be noted that the phrase Jesus uses can be translated literally, “You will take alive many humans.” The phrase “take alive” translates a Greek word from which we get the word “zoology”. Thus Luke avoids the unpalatable notion of catching and gutting humans! No, that is not what Jesus meant. There is a deeper meaning here. Jesus turns this miraculous catch of fish into an occasion to call Peter, James, and John into his service. Their new calling will involve them in taking alive many others into the service of Jesus.

I want us to think for a moment about Luke’s story of the calling of Peter and his cohorts James and John. These fishermen had worked all night without luck. Then Jesus urges them to launch back out into the deep water even in the daytime when fishing in the Sea of Galilee was seldom successful. When Peter guides his boat into the deep water, he is almost inundated with hundreds of fish. There in the deep waters there is life, unexpected life, abundant life.

If there is one thing our Christian life teaches us, it is this: No risk, no reward. The play it safe kind of faith that hugs the shoreline seldom experiences much if anything. The predictable life brings predictable results. I wonder how many of us hug the shoreline. A friend of mine once said that too many of us subscribe to this motto: “Hey, let’s get shallow.” The shallows along the shoreline-nothing ventured, nothing gained. Maybe, just maybe, that is why for so many of us the Christian life is so incredibly boring. We expect little and we risk little. And we get back exactly what we put into it.

I think one of the functions of our gathering Sunday after Sunday to worship God is this: we remind ourselves there is more to life than simple safety and comfort. The story of the faithful provides so many examples of people who ventured out into the deep waters and found life, abundant life. In the deep waters they found so many blessings their nets were filled to overflowing.

Today during the Adult CE hour Vel, Mark, Hilda and I will share with you some of the things we learned last fall in China. I must say that those two weeks brought so much into my life that I am still processing it. We met the church in China, an amazing body of Christians who have literally come back from the dead. Or a death that the government planned for all religious groups back during Mao’s dreaded Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. We had lunch with a pastor who spent 13 years in prison for his faith during those terrible years of suffering. Now he simply beams with joy as he gives thanks for the new life in the Chinese church. That man was sent into the deep waters and has he ever witnessed signs and wonders. Teeming life, abundant life, new life in Christ-all over China.

In the remarkable history of Christian missionary efforts in China, there are countless stories of those who truly ventured out into the deep waters. I love one

of those stories in particular. In 1583 a 50-year-old Jesuit Catholic scholar from Italy named Matteo Ricci landed in Macao and began his missionary efforts in South China. What is remarkable is that Father Ricci wrote and spoke Chinese fluently. He presented himself as a philosopher, moralist, mathematician, and astronomer. Ricci and his colleagues familiarized themselves with Chinese forms of courtesy and correctness, immersing themselves in the ancient philosophy of Confucius.

Ricci's goal was to win a hearing for Christianity among the Chinese elite and intelligentsia. So he formulated the Christian faith in terms this Confucian culture could understand. The one true God became the "Lord on High" or the "Lord of Heaven." Ricci was so successful in this effort that in 1601 the Emperor allowed him to live in Beijing. Ricci then began to teach in private academies where he gained a well-deserved reputation for scholarly excellence. In 1605 the emperor gave him permission to build a chapel. That church still stands in Beijing to this day. In fact, it was rebuilt in 1904 after having twice been burned down.

Father Ricci devoted his life to introducing into Chinese life the good news of Jesus. He showed amazing respect for Chinese cultural forms and ideas and tailored his message to his audience. What strikes me here is a total commitment to a new culture, learning the Chinese language and thought forms to present the claims of Christ. It is people like Father Ricci who remind us what can be done when we launch out into the deep waters. Amazing things. Truly amazing.

So Jesus tells Peter that he will take alive many humans. And those who have launched out into the deep with Peter have seen that come true time and again. Friends in Christ, as we come to this table of peace and forgiveness, we would be challenged-each and every one of us-to move past the shallows into the deep where life is teeming and abundant. There we will find an adventure of faith that really will fill our spirits with joy and meaning and hope. There beyond in the deep water. Thanks be to God. Amen.