

Deep River

Psalm 138, Luke 5:1-11

Whitefish United Methodist Church

February 13, 2011

- † Three deep rivers—by Montana standards, anyway—gave me cause to cross over them this past week. First the Flathead, then the Missouri, and finally the Yellowstone beckoned on my journey to Emigrant for a church retreat.
- † Why travel 760 miles in the winter over three mighty rivers for a gathering to help new pastors (and their mentors) strengthen their ministries? It's true that I asked myself that question several times as I gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles during ground blizzards, white-outs, and icy, dark conditions on the road.
- † Why did we go? To deepen our faith, our relationships to God and to each other and to you.
- † I drove with my friend Chris from Bozeman, who serves as the worship coordinator for the church where I helped pastor ten years ago. We were talking about music, and my former colleague Dave McConnell's sermon series for February, which is also Black History month.
- † Years ago, fresh out of seminary in Chicago with several African American colleagues, I came to Bozeman and insisted that we celebrate Black History month at the church. My colleague Dave, the senior pastor, looked at me as if I had two heads—celebrate Black History month in Bozeman? But he humored me, and we sang a few spirituals that month.
- † Imagine my delight and surprise to hear that this year he is preaching on African American leaders in our faith—this Sunday's it is James Weldon Johnson and "Lift Every Voice and Sing." Considered one of the best

preachers in our conference, I can't wait to hear Dave's insights and lessons.

† My friend Chris's husband Jim, a professor of statistics at Montana State University, reported that he was singing in a new group at the church's late service. "It's called 'The Gospel Train,'" he reported, with a twinkle in his eye. "And last week we sang 'Deep River'—a cappella, the five of us."

† "I wish I could have heard it," I said, "because I love that song and I love of all of you who sang it." We won't get to hear Bozeman's Gospel Train, but take a few moments and listen to this beautiful version of the spiritual, "Deep River."

† But why should we listen to this song today? What meaning does it have for us?

† *Deep river, my home is over Jordan.*

† *Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into campground.*

† *Oh, don't you want to go to that gospel feast, That promised land where all is peace? Deep river, my home is over Jordan, Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into campground.*

† What is that "deep river" in the old song? Is it the river Jordan? Is it a generic baptismal river reminding us of salvation in Christ? Or is it code for the Ohio River or the Mississippi River?

† Many African American spirituals were just that, "code songs" or "signal songs" that slaves used to send messages of freedom, messages of hope to one another that their masters didn't understand. So the slaves, when they sang Deep River, were singing of getting to heaven, but they were also singing of getting over the Ohio or Mississippi River to freedom in the north. Those were deep rivers to cross indeed, for if the slave did escape a

plantation, one would be pursued by dogs and bounty hunters and, if caught, would meet a horrible fate.

† But the slaves sang freedom songs, songs of faith. Their deep Christian faith kept them anchored in the Lord even when they lived in captivity. Even while enslaved, they sang of their freedom in Christ and their hope that one day, sweet Harriet Tubman, would be coming for to carry them home.

† Deep river. Deep faith even while enslaved. A deep challenge for us because we aren't sure we want to love and trust Jesus that much.

† Have you ever loved deeply? Of course you have. Perhaps your first love bloomed with that feeling. Or maybe that's how you loved your child, your spouse, your parent, your grandchild, your country.

† Have you forgotten what it's like to love like that? I hope not. But I know that for me, as the years have passed by, I have learned to guard myself from that kind of intense love and the trust that goes along with it.

† Afterall, you won't get hurt as much if you don't love so deeply. And our culture certainly encourages us to stay on the surface of life—keep busy with all the virtual relationships and experiences, don't get overcommitted, experience a little of everything.

† And so, for many of us, to experience relationship deeply is something from the distant past or something we see only in the movies.

† Now let's return to the shores of the lake of Gennesaret, also known as the Sea of Galilee, the scene of today's Gospel story. The day had been long and unsuccessful. The weary fishermen were washing their nets and probably wishing for the day to end.

† Jesus interrupted their evening rituals with a request to teach from Simon's boat and a further request for them to try again—push out into the **deep** and fish

there. Jesus said: “Put out into the **deep** water, and let down your nets for a catch.”

- † It sounds pretty simple, doesn't it? But is it really? Do you know what Jesus is really asking? He is asking Simon Peter to trust him. To trust him so much that Peter would be willing to leave the shallow places in his life and in his work and begin to explore the depths.
- † To go to the limits of what he thinks is possible, not only for him, but for all those around him. “Go out into the deep water,” says Jesus, “trust me and see what happens.”
- † And that may be why Peter is reluctant to do it at first. He knows that once he takes the risk of leaving what is familiar and comfortable, the direction of his life might very well change.
- † He knows that when he leaves the shallow places behind—shallow places in his work, in his relationships with others, to himself, and to God—and dares to go a little deeper in trust, things are going to be different for him and for anyone who is around him.
- † Peter gives us a good example of how to resist God's call to enter into the depths of your life: Oh, there's no use for me to do into those depths, Jesus. I have fished those waters already. I have tried to pray. I have tried to study. I have tried to become a servant like you, Jesus.
- † I have tried to love with abandon like you. I have tried to live out my faith in ways that would please you, Jesus, and I always seem to come up short. I'm tired of fishing those same waters. There's nothing out there in the depths for me. And besides, I have so many other things to do. I have been really busy.
- † You know, I have read this scripture many times, and this is the first time that I have noticed the significance of that little word “deep” in it. And it struck me

with the same impact you get when you're out ocean fishing on a charter boat and a really big fish hits your line.

- † And when Rachel asked me what I was preaching on this Sunday, and I told her it was about going deeper with our faith, she replied: "Wow, that sounds scary." And it is. Because who knows what you will haul up in the nets of your life when you cast them deep into your relationships, especially into your relationship with Jesus.
- † Are you ready to love Jesus deeply? It sounds a bit over-the-top, doesn't it?
- † Maybe you are perfectly satisfied with your life as it is. Maybe you are satisfied with an occasional faith, a casual acquaintance with Jesus. A marriage of convenience, we might say. But maybe somewhere in the depths of your own spirit you want something more.
- † One of the familiar pictures of Jesus that adorns the walls of thousands of Sunday school classrooms comes from an image in the Book of Revelation. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." The picture is of Jesus, with a lantern in his hand, knocking on the door of a neat little cottage.
- † The message is that Jesus comes and knocks on the door of every human heart. But in light of this gospel lesson, maybe we ought to be careful about answering the door. Maybe we ought to think a little bit before inviting him into the home that is our heart.
- † If you invite him in, he might start rearranging the furniture, might clean the place up, might discard some old worn-out pieces and add some new ones, might give the place a whole new look and feel.
- † As I said earlier, maybe that's not what you want. But maybe somewhere in the depths of your heart that's exactly what you want and know you need: a rearrangement, a new look, a new direction.

- † Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long, but we haven’t caught a thing. Yet, if you say so, I will let down the nets.” And then he gives us a model for what we can expect if we go out into the depths of our life with Jesus, too.
- † He finds the kind of abundance he could never imagine. And oh, it’s not the kind of abundance that makes him rich in things. It’s the kind of abundance that shows Peter and us how rich God’s grace and love are. And how much God wants to be in relationship with each of us.
- † And that relationship doesn’t happen suddenly, all at once. So many times I’ve heard it preached that the disciples left everything all at once and followed him right away.
- † But the scriptures say that Peter and the other followers had to grow into true discipleship. They learned by making mistakes, by trial and error, and that’s how we learn, too.
- † And yet by trusting, by being open, by risking allowing ourselves to be drawn to Jesus as a moth is drawn to a flame, we learn what it is to love him deeply. And in loving him with abandon, we learn to love others and ourselves that way, too.
- † Ah, but you say, sometimes a moth is so drawn to a flame that it perishes in it. And that’s right. Remember the passage that occurs in all the gospels, that wonderful paradox: those that try to save their lives will lose them, and those that lose their lives for my sake and the sake of the gospel will find them.
- † Yes, it’s comfortable sometimes in the shallows of life. But often it involves coming up empty, too. And that feeling of emptiness often has a way of opening our eyes and our ears to an encounter with the living Christ out in the depths.

- † And when we cast our nets there, often a miracle occurs. That’s the way the disciples experienced it, anyway. And that’s how we can experience it, too. Peter’s response to the miracle was to fall to his knees, saying, “Lord, I am not worthy—go away from me. For I am a sinful man.”
- † And of course he is not worthy. None of us is. There is nothing we can ever do to earn God’s grace, but we are called nonetheless, called to discipleship, called to love deeply Jesus and those about whom he cares.
- † And when we make a commitment to love like that, changes begin to happen. The first thing we notice is that we are less fearful. “Don’t be afraid,” Jesus tells us. “Come, follow me, and I will teach you to fish for people.”
- † Something happens when you become a disciple of Jesus Christ. Your life begins a process of transformation, and you become a witness to the power that is transforming you.
- † You don’t necessarily become a teacher, a preacher, or an evangelist, but you become less fearful, more trusting, more forgiving and more loving. Your attitude and your actions bear witness as you grow in faith, and the hearts, the minds, and the lives of others in your life are influenced too.
- † And yes, it’s scary. So scary that Peter said, in awe to Jesus: “Depart from me”. And the good news is that Jesus didn’t—and does not depart but continues to be with us, to remind us of the wonder at the depths of his love for us.
- † Because he loves you. He loves me. He loves each of us more deeply than the deepest river.
- † Will you plunge into the depths of his mercy, his mystery, and leave changed by his love?
- † *Deep river, my home is over Jordan.*
- † *Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into campground.*

† *Oh, don't you want to go to that gospel feast, That promised land where all is peace?*

† Don't you want to follow Jesus to the deep waters of faith? Aren't you a bit scared, but also excited to see where that journey takes us? Oh, don't you want to go to that gospel feast?

† Amen.

Sources:

Adam J. Copeland, "Deep Water," <http://www.adamjcopeland.com>