

On February 10, 2019, six local pastors exchanged pulpits in support of Christianity Unity. This Sermon was preached at the First Evangelical Lutheran Church by Pastor Cheryl Raine. Her main text was Luke 5:1-11 and supported by 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 and Psalm 138:1-8 and 139:3-18.

**Here is the primary reading from Luke 5:1-11**

<sup>1</sup>Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, <sup>2</sup>he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." <sup>5</sup>Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." <sup>6</sup>When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. <sup>7</sup>So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. <sup>8</sup>But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" <sup>9</sup>For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; <sup>10</sup>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." <sup>11</sup>When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

**The Message is entitled, *Into the Deep***

What a delight to be with you this Sunday morning! I have had a wonderful weekend celebrating Christian Unity, for I was a retreat speaker for a group of Methodist Women on Friday and Saturday, and now I am worshipping with all of you! The church I serve, the Redlands' clergy and this city has marvelously welcomed me into this city. I remember my first few months in town and people always asked why I moved to Redlands. I would respond with, "I have been called to be the new pastor for the Presbyterian Church on Cajon Street." The responses I always received were incredibly welcoming. So, indeed, it is a privilege to serve our amazing God in this city.

So, as I begin this morning let me ask you to draw from your memories, for I want you to remember a time in your life when you felt you were being called into the deep, to a place that you were hesitant to go, as was the fatigued Simon with his nets, or a place that you were called to go that you hoped you would never have to go. As you pull from your memories, let me share with you from mine.

As I boarded a red-eye to New York City, while my parents, sister, and dear friend, were streaming tears, I realized that I was really putting myself out into the deep. Now, as a sixteen-year-old I really did want to be a foreign exchange student; but given my classical violin training, I was hoping to spend a year abroad in Germany or Austria or somewhere in Europe, steeped in classical music. I certainly had not imagined that I would be matched with a European family that lived in the Republic of South Africa. Yet, that cold January night, I was called into the deep, as I began my year-long journey with a family who lived in a country

governed by the policies of apartheid, which supported racial separation and unequal treatment of indigenous Africans and mixed-race Coloureds.

My year abroad was a crucible for my forming faith, as I sorted through what I really believed about being created in God's image, not just me, but all of humanity – the family I lived with, our South African Maid, and our Garden Boy, as well as the Dutch and the British given the eternal tension between them within the country. The words of the psalmist resonate with the recollection of my experience, "When I called you, God, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul." My life line, my strength throughout my yearlong experience was my faith. For I held firmly to the message of God's love for all people, even though I was confronted again and again with the reality of dehumanization and hate of the indigenous Africans. Even the family I lived with – every Sunday churchgoer – espoused a rhetoric of hate. Into the deep I was tossed and my journals bear witness to the source that strengthened my soul – God alone.

Let me leap ahead to another experience. It happened one Friday morning in Garden Grove. I was serving a church in that community and a man just two days out of prison dropped by the church because he heard on the street that he might be able to get a shower at the church. We had one or two people a week who dropped in for showers, so his request was welcomed and honored. Alan shared, just days later, that he had prayed to God for a community, for he knew he could not make it on his own, given that he had spent the last 19 years in prison. Well, Alan became a fixture at our church, never missing a Sunday. Within a couple months of his arrival, we had quite an influx of people stopping by asking for showers, for he had put the word out on the street. Into the deep the church was called, as we heard God calling us to ask Alan to organize a shower ministry. Alan went to work and before we knew it we had 20-30 people every Tuesday and Thursday. The deep got deeper, for we were called once again when our custodian retired, for Alan applied for the job. Again, and again, we heard those words "put out into the deep" and we responded as the shower ministry expanded to include a meal, haircuts, clothes, and a partnership with county resources.

This church of about 85 members with an average age of 78 continually risked saying yes as they plunged into the deep. I know that this shower ministry, which I spent close to 20 hours a week supporting during my last three years as their pastor was another crucible for my faith. This ministry transformed not only the church, but their pastor as well. I once again was challenged to see all of humanity, most especially the discarded and despised of our own community with the compassionate eyes of Christ. By the end of my ministry in Garden Grove, I knew almost 300 individuals struggling with homelessness. I knew their stories. I knew their struggles. I knew the transformative worth of their experience of being treated as fully human, if only for a few hours each Tuesday and Thursday. I experienced resurrection again and again as individual lives found a new way forward. This church in Garden Grove continues to wade into the deep, for this shower ministry now serves almost 90 people each Tuesday and Thursday.

What if this church, if this pastor, if the church's staff had said no to Alan that first day he asked for a shower? What if fear rather than obedience took root? What if we had not been willing to put into the deep?

Simon responded with an excuse at first, but then with reluctance he said, "If you say so, I will let down the nets."

“Did you recall a time when God called you into the deep? Did you have an excuse like Simon? Yet, with a bit of prodding by the Spirit you finally say yes. Fear is often our first reaction, for the deep seems unknown, risky and even messy. It is by God’s grace alone that any of us dare to take the plunge, trusting that God will increase the strength of our resolve.

Did you notice that even when Simon experiences the miraculous in our passage, he back paddles saying, “Go away from me?” Even when we risk putting out into the deep, we are often overwhelmed by the miraculous provision of our God. We wonder can we do this again or do we even want to do it again. I know this to be true, for being called into the deep doesn’t really ever get easier. It will always take a leap of faith, but as William Sloane Coffin says, that is the beauty of our faith; for he writes, “I love the recklessness of faith. First you leap, and then you grow wings.

Jesus reassures Simon of this truth saying those oft spoken words throughout our whole canon of scripture, “Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid of putting out into the deep. Do not be afraid of leaping first for I will be with you. Do not be afraid for I will increase the strength of your soul.

As I reflect on my own spiritual journey, I realize that calls into the deep are where growth happens, where my faith grew deeper roots and produced more fruit. Even fruit that was abundantly more than all I could ask for or imagine. The same holds true for churches. When we play it safe, when we settle for status quo, when we refuse to take risks, our roots wither and our tree never even blossoms.

I don’t know where Jesus will call you, individually or communally, but I do know that Jesus will. Jesus will ask you again and again to put out into the deep. The question from our texts today is whether we will or not.

My prayer for each of you and for this church, and for myself and the church I serve, is that we will. That we will not let our fears overtake us. That we will invite the Spirit to strengthen our resolve to respond to Jesus’ call into the deep. Amen.