

*Plymouth's Mission I: Inviting (installment one of a three-part series)  
"Into Deep Water"*

*Luke 5.1-11*

*The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 7 February 2010*

This coming September, I get to do two things simultaneously that I love: I get to go fly fishing and lead a spiritual retreat. And I get to lead the retreat at Ring Lake Ranch in Wyoming with my dear friend, Pete, who is the minister at Community UCC in Boulder. We have a lot in common besides being UCC ministers who fly-fish: we both studied East Asian history as undergraduates, we've both studied Celtic Christianity, and we have similar last names...his is Terpenning!

Now, you may not think of fishing as a spiritual endeavor, but I assure you that it is. Being a fisher of the human soul is, after all, what ministers do, isn't it? And in our tradition, we are **all** ministers. And you've got to have the right flies in your box and you have to know what kind of fish you're targeting. You've got to put your waders on and be willing to get wet.

Some of us approach our faith as an intellectual discipline. There are a lot of us here at Plymouth like that, so I think I'd choose a nice parachute Adams for us. You all like a bit of subtlety, a meaty quotation from a good theologian, a fine adult ed. class; you're eager, and it doesn't take much to get you to go after a tiny fly.

In the United Church, we also have some folks whose faith is intertwined with their politics. Now, don't get me wrong: I **don't** think one's politics and one's faith should be divorced from one another. I **do** think one's faith should determine how one responds ethically and politically. And our members are likely to come up with different conclusions, which is fine! And for those of us who see social justice as an integral part of your faith journey, it takes a bit of good casting to land a nice, bright San Juan worm in front of us.

Others of us take a more contemplative tack, and approach our faith with feeling and emotion. We are the folks who might go after a terrestrial (a dry fly meant to look like an ant or a grasshopper). I love to see a trout gulp these, which they often do. If you're this type of person, you want to taste your faith, feel it with all your being. We love music, and we might also like the silence of our Taizé service.

Still others want a more straightforward approach to their religion: for you, I'd load up the wooly bugger. It's a larger fly that's easier to spot in the water. We want to take in our faith with a good deal of certainty and solid interpretation. We like to hear straightforward exposition of scripture and an order of worship that doesn't change too much.

Now, many flies float on the surface of the water. But it's also possible to attract fish below the surface. Some folks like to have a bit less visibility in the congregation; you may be a bit reticent about committing yourself. We may not see you here every Sunday, but that doesn't mean you aren't critical to the life of the church. So, for you, I'd use a gold-bead nymph; it hangs under the surface of the water and shimmers a bit and gets the fish's attention.

In any case, what a fly fisher has to do is to "match the hatch," meaning that whatever insects are hatching at a certain point in the season is what you put on your line, whether it's a little mayfly or a huge green drake. If someone is going through an illness, they need one kind of care; when they celebrate a wedding, another approach is needed; a death of a spouse or partner necessitates yet another type of care. We need to be sensitive to the seasons of people's lives and what's happening to them right now.

All of this sounds wonderfully neat and almost scientific: that the right fly (or the right approach to faith) will attract the designated type of person. The wonderful thing is that it's **messy and inexact**. Sometimes, you might go after something that's not on your regular diet: a woman who might typically find social justice appealing might be moved by the contemplative dimension of faith. A rigorous intellectual might have tears streaming down his cheek after singing a hymn.



One of the lines in the passage from Luke's gospel that jumped out at me the other day was "putting out into deep water."

On the surface, going out into deep water means trusting Jesus enough to paddle out farther, perhaps beyond your comfort zone. What does "deep water" mean in the lives of Simon and the other early disciples? It means going beyond their comfort zones, bucking the conventional wisdom, abandoning their relatively secure lives to follow Jesus. This idea of leaving everything behind is a recurrent theme in Luke's gospel, and it's all about **total commitment**.

Now, we may not think so much about moving away from our parents, but in their first-century Judean culture, it was a big deal. Robert Tannehill, a New Testament scholar, puts it in perspective this way: "People did not think of themselves as independent individuals but took their identity from a social unit, particularly the family, which required loyalty and conformity.... 'Leaving everything' means leaving the family and leaving one's means of support.... Whatever economic security there was came through the family. In leaving their families these men were abandoning family responsibilities and their own security. However...they moved from an original family to a 'surrogate family,' the community of disciples."<sup>1</sup> In other words, they were out in deep water.

To follow Jesus, Peter had to get off the lakeshore and get into the darned boat and then put out into deep water and **take chances**. Christianity is not a low-risk endeavor. You can't just sit in a pew, sing three hymns, say a couple of prayers and listen to a sermon: that's only getting down to the lakeshore. To be a Christian means putting out into deep water. They way of Jesus is a difficult path.

Each of us needs to have a **spiritual or inward** stake in our faith, and that means putting out into deep water. A regular practice of prayer is one way to accomplish this. For others of us, it involves reading and study. When you cast your nets, you're likely to catch spiritual depth.

Each of us needs to have a **tangible, contributory** stake in our faith. We need to do some form of service to express our faith. The third verse of that great Spanish hymn "You Have Come Down to the Lakeshore," says, "You need my hands, my exhaustion;" that's deep water. Our faith is about *doing*, not just believing. When you cast your nets, you're likely to find deep meaning and transformation in your own life, while helping bring in the kingdom.

Each of us needs to have an **expansive, outward** stake in our faith. We don't hoard the benefits of our spirituality for ourselves: we reach out through mission. We extend an invitation to others to become part of "the way," acknowledging that ours is not the *only* way, but it is a profoundly good and valid way. Plymouth has been the best kept secret in Fort Collins, but that's changing. We have to open the fly box and then choose the right fly. When you do that, you will find sisters and brothers with whom to share the journey.




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<sup>1</sup> Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, p. 101.

Our mission statement, which is printed in your bulletin this morning, starts with this statement: “It is our mission to worship God and help make God’s realm visible in the lives of people, individually and collectively, especially as it is set forth in the life, teachings, death and living presence of Jesus Christ.” And then we set out three ways of approaching our faith, briefly: inviting, transforming, and sending. And today, of course, we’re focusing on “inviting.”

We have an incredible gift here at Plymouth. We have one of the most vibrant and vital congregations in the United Church of Christ. Who wouldn’t want to share that gift with someone?

We have theology that sets us apart from the fundamentalists and the traditionalists...a theology that enables us to invite gays and lesbians into the full life of the church. Who wouldn’t want to share that gift with someone?

We have the best adult educational program of any church in Fort Collins. Who wouldn’t want to share that gift with someone?

We are non-exclusivist Christians, who understand that Christ is our gateway to the divine, the sacred heart of the universe...and we understand that there are other gateways. Who wouldn’t want to share that gift with someone?

What is the greatest gift you receive from Plymouth? (Shout it out!)

Let me ask you a question: **When was the last time you invited someone – a friend, a co-worker, a teacher, your dentist, or a neighbor – to Plymouth?**

So, *where is the resistance???* See if any of these statements fit you:

- “Well, we don’t want to be like *‘those Christians’* who are out proselytizing.”
- “Religion is a private matter between me and my maker.”
- “I’m just a little embarrassed to ask someone.”
- “I want to keep Plymouth just the way it is...we don’t need new people.”
- “Hey, Hal, getting new members is *your* job.”

Remember how the disciples had to push out into deep water? I’m going to address your resistance here, so please listen up:

1. You do not have to put on a white shirt and tie and a little Formica nametag and go door to door. *Telling someone about Plymouth isn’t forceful proselytizing...it’s an invitation. Amy Vanderbilt and Miss Manners would approve.*
2. Religion has a personal aspect, but *it is never private.*
3. Would you be embarrassed to ask someone to come to the Fort Collins Club with you and try it out if they wanted to get their body into shape? *There are more spiritually flabby people in Fort Collins than physically flabby folks. Keep your eyes open for someone who might need Plymouth.*
4. You can’t keep Plymouth just the way it is. *Change is going to continue to happen here at Plymouth, and I want you to be a part of it.*
5. Getting new members is part of my job, and we’ve had a net gain of over 200 members since I arrived in 2002...*but I sure haven’t done this alone!*

The gift of Plymouth and the gift of progressive Christianity is too great to hoard and keep just for ourselves.

May we each extend an invitation and know deeply that we are called as fishers and that we, like Simon Peter, must put out into deep water if we’re going to catch anything.

Amen.