

“Taste the Deep” – Message for August 8 and 10, 2008 – Pastor Laurie McHugh

Texts: Gal 5:1, John 8:31-36, John 15:1-11

In a way tonight/today is the culmination of all the messages you’ve heard this summer about being fruitful – the practices of fruitful congregations that have been the focus of the last five weekends. We have talked about radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity. And today/tonight I want to invite you to commit to those practices, both as a congregation and as individuals, to deepen your walk with Jesus Christ, to move out of the shallows and further into the abundant, fruitful, exciting life that God has in store for each one of us.

(SUNDAY: SHOW “Braving the Deep” video)

I just returned a couple days ago from Orlando, where I spent a week at a training event called the School of Congregational Development. Some of the participants there were being trained in starting new churches, and others in turning around tired, existing churches. I’ve got to tell you, I came away really excited! And I’m hoping you’ll hold me accountable for my what I’ve learned and join me in conversation and in work together in the coming months. I’m ready to go deeper and bolder, myself. I hope you will, too.

God has a really amazing sense of timing sometimes. I had charted out the theme for today’s/tonight’s worship experience before I left for Orlando – this thing about moving out of shallow faith and going deeper with God – and wouldn’t you know that two of the speakers I heard this week used water or ocean imagery as they described the process of growing Christians in their churches. They gave me

some good handles for articulating my thoughts. One of them, a woman named Claudia Lavy, who's written a book entitled *Deepening Your Effectiveness*, used a diagram something like this: (show picture)

I will go into more detail on this at a future meeting with our leaders and staff, but I want to invite you to find yourself in this picture. I will briefly describe each of the stages that these figures represent. What I learned Claudia's workshop is that for people at each of these stages there is a different key question they're asking, a different barrier or challenge that they face in proceeding to the next level of depth, and a different focus of ministry that is needed to help them grow, which requires different kinds of people (not always the pastor), to help them along. As I said, a lot of this is for our leaders and staff to address, but I want to summarize a tiny bit so you can perhaps place yourself next to one of the people in this picture.

The first person, the one standing on the beach, is a person who has no connection with any church. If you're within the range of my voice you aren't this person. He's your neighbor. She's your coworker or the person who bags your groceries. He's the barrista you meet every morning at Starbucks who knows your name and your order before you even open your mouth to say hello. She's your hairdresser or the woman who works out next to you. The question this unchurched person asks is, "Is this God stuff for real? Is this relevant to me?" The primary barrier is cynicism, and the primary minister is you – the acquaintance or old trusted friend who's attended a church, the average person who simply offers a non-threatening invitation to "come and see."

Now, while none of you fit this stage, I tell you a little about it and include it in the diagram because God is calling each one of us to go a little deeper. And you've been here before. It may have been a long time ago or just a year or two ago, but you've been here. And you know people who are here. And it's up to you to issue the invitation that will bring them to the next step. This is your church and it's up to you to invite your friends and families and acquaintances to come. We'll help with creating the events and the worship experiences that are worth your staking your reputation in the marketplace and your standing in your family to invite them. But issuing the invitation to go deeper is up to you.

Now, there may be a few people here worshipping with us today/tonight that are this second figure – the person who is testing the water. This is the curious person. They've come and seen, and, if we've done our part right, they've experienced our ministry of radical hospitality and witnessed our authentic Christian community – and what the friend that invited them said about it has been confirmed. I mention this person in the picture because the person in ministry with this person is not the same one who issued the initial invitation; it has to be someone else, someone this person has just met – and it might be you. You need to know that the primary barrier for this curious person is that they are sensitive. They notice things that church members probably don't. They pay attention to what the entry way looks like and they pay attention to who you talk to and your body language and a host of other things. So we need to be careful, and our hospitality needs to be radical and genuine. If you imagine that you are at this stage, I invite you to go a little deeper.

The next figure in the picture, the one getting his (or her) feet wet, is at the place where life change begins. This is the new or rededicated believer. This is a critical stage for our church, I think, because we often misinterpret the question that comes out of these folks' mouths, which is: "How can I help?" We take that question at face value and give these folks a job, and eventually they dry out spiritually. You notice, this person is still just splashing around in the water. They need more nourishment than that to weather the storms that life brings us. So they need to give – but they also need to receive. And that's why our teaching and small group ministries are so important. They help address the real question: "How do I fit in here?" and they call persons to go deeper. If you are at this stage, I invite you to join a small group, to get engaged in some intentional faith development, and go a little deeper. You'll be glad you did.

The primary barrier for this stage, by the way, is comfort. If you can say to yourself, "I'm comfortable here," you're actually in trouble, and it's time to get pushed a little way into the water. Comfort is the tricky barrier and challenge here, along with the sentiment that faith is "a private matter."

Well, I want to tell you, church, the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news, and it's bold news – not mild news. Jesus' death was a public execution, not a quiet bedside cover-up. He died big and loud for a big and bold cause – YOU. Faith in him is about living by giving your life away.

If you've been paying attention to any of the things I've said in this pulpit this summer, I would expect that there's been something that agitated you. If so, that's good! Holy agitation is what preaching is supposed to do to you. But I don't expect to simply agitate you here in worship and then send you out the

door to deal with that agitation all by yourself. That's why we have small groups. We all need someone with whom we can work out our holy agitation. We need spiritual wrestling partners. We need a group of people we can trust with whom we can be vulnerable, a place where we can talk about how God is stirring us and igniting dreams in us and calling us to be more and to go deep; people who can hear and hold those musings in a sacred space, and who will remember them for us, like signposts on a journey, and hold them up to us each time we gather, like truth-mirrors, urging us to go a little farther, to be a little more faithful, a little more bold, a little more like Jesus, each step of the way. We need people who will pray for us and with us, lending the Spirit's power to our walk. We need people who will cheer when we take a bold new step and who will be there to pick us up and encourage us when we fall or fail or hurt. We weren't meant to go it alone; that's why God made other people. So cherish that gift!

The fourth figure in the picture represents the seasoned but restless believers. They've just got in over their head, and they're figuring out whether to tread water, to go back to the shore, or to swim. I know some of you are here. Some of you at this stage may express your frustration with church or its leadership or your place in its ministry, and if you're not been in a small group since back at stage 3, or at least getting into one at this point, frankly, you're likely to leave eventually. If you think you're at this stage I want you to talk to me, not because I'm afraid of your leaving or feel some proprietary desire to "keep" you here at Burlingame UMC, but because I want to help you connect with the ministry that will help you go deeper with God. We all need swimming lessons, and the primary barrier for this stage in spiritual development is fear. When you learn to address and let go of that fear, you're ready for the next step.

(11 am omit)

(Scene from *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*)

We need people who remind us that we are the daughters and sons of the King, and that we need fear nothing, nor be content to live in cages, going through the motions, sitting quietly in the pews. Christians are called to a life of adventure, not a life in the shallows. Other Christians who have been to the deeper waters can help us tap into the longings and dreams God has planted in us, and help us follow them into the depths.

The fifth figure represents people at the place in their spiritual life where they find an intense joy in the realization that they were meant to be doing this bold following of Jesus all their life. They have a sense of God's bigger purposes, find that the things they were afraid of in stage 4 are not so scary as they once thought, and that they depend more on God than ever before. And yet even people at this stage could go deeper, and they face barriers and challenges. And if you're here, I invite you to go deeper.

The sixth figure is the fully committed follower of Jesus, and this person also faces challenges and has special ministry needs to stay the course. And just as the number one rule in scuba/ocean swimming is "never dive/swim alone," those in stages 5 and 6 need authentic community to keep them from the trials of isolation and things that may destroy their ministry.

Jesus said: "Remain in my love. Remain in me, and bear fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing." He also said, "I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly." I say it nearly every Sunday in worship: Wherever you are, and

wherever you are in your walk of faith, know that you are welcome in this place. But also, wherever you are, God is calling you to go deeper in your walk (or maybe I should say deeper in the pool!), that you may bear even more fruit and know even more abundance. Amen.