

A SERMON PREACHED AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN
CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE, ON FEBRUARY 10, 2019

One day a rather inebriated ice fisherman drilled a hole in the ice and peered into the hole and a loud voice from above said, "There are no fish down there."

He walked several yards away and drilled another hole and peered into the hole and again the voice said, "There's no fish down there."

He then walked about 50 yards away and drilled another hole and again the voice said, "There's no fish down there."

He looked up into the sky and asked, "God, is that you?"

"No, you fool," the voice said, "it's the rink manager."ⁱ

Today's gospel message is one we all know - - the calling of the apostles from their vocation as simple fisherman to their mission and ministry as disciples of Christ. According to tradition Andrew is called first (which is why the church liturgical year begins in Advent on the feast of St. Andrew); he goes and seeks out his brother; and they seek out another pair of brothers, James and John, the sons of the fisherman, Zebedee. Eventually they call others, and thus begins the earthly ministry of Jesus and his disciples. Jesus uses strange language to speak to them, that they may be fishermen now, but that he plans to make them fishers of **men**. Whether they or we understand that terminology remains to be seen.

"The idea behind fishing is to know the fish you are looking for and attract it so you can make the catch. To catch a fish we must know what equipment to use, the habitat and depth of the water we are fishing in, as well as the kind of bait the fish will go after. After we understand everything we need for real fishing, then how do we relate that to being fishers of men?"

God asks us to make disciples of all nations. Just as we need equipment to be fishermen, we need equipment to be fishers of men. Paul in *Ephesians* tells us that putting on the armor of God is one way to be ready at all times with everything we need. Especially important are the shield of faith with which we ward off the opposition from demonic forces who don't want to see us saved by the gospel of Christ and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Without these two pieces of spiritual equipment, we will find fishing for the souls of others impossible.

Not only must we have the armor of God as our equipment, but we must also know the fish we are trying to catch.”ⁱⁱ As large of the lake is where Jesus and the disciples were fishing there seems to have been only three types of fish available: tilapia, minnows, and at one time, perch.ⁱⁱⁱ Minnows were essential and help to explain how Jesus’ disciples could have amassed so many of them in one net.^{iv} “And for Luke there was only one effective net—the gospel of Jesus Christ. This was Jesus’ message to Peter and Andrew—follow Me, learn of Me, know and understand My mission and My message. Only then will you be able to be fishers of men.”^v What is the message that Jesus wants to pass on? Is it that God is love, as we have so often have heard? Is it that the world has or is coming to an end, as has been so often predicted? “Consider the simple Greek for 'Fishers of men' in the Greek language, which is halieis anthrôpos. The word 'halieis' is used for someone who works at the sea, or someone who has to do with the sea. 'Anthrôpos' means humankind. Therefore, the accurate meaning of the phrase “fishers of men” may be described as working at the sea to catch (save) humanity, not how it is usually misunderstood that Jesus is referring to catch men physically. It is more about their spiritual salvation.”^{vi} Or it may mean, like Gilligan and the Captain, Too, merely lost at sea. One could certainly interpret Hemingway’s *Old Man and the Sea* in this way. “Santiago as mentor, spiritual father, old man, or old age; and Manolin as pupil, son, boy, or youth. Santiago is the great fisherman and Manolin his apprentice.”^{vii} A great allegory, of the type found in the Greek classics or the Bible. So the way we are to be fishers of men can be quite simple: speaking to others about Christ, being like Christ to others, loving others as we have been taught Christ does. But keeping it simple. This is important for the way we live our daily Christian lives. But they are not all of the story as written in today’s passage of *Luke*. It itself is full of metaphor and symbolism. Let me give you some examples.

The story takes place at Gennesaret in the area of Naphtali. The name translates as “garden of riches.” Therefore we might expect that some riches will be imparted there or some great wisdom. Jesus sees two boats by the lake, a hint that the story will take place in twos or pairs. They were washing their nets, a hint at a kind of baptism that is to come. They caught a great number of fish so that their net was breaking, a clue as to the type of results they’ll have if they follow Jesus’ way. A confession by Peter and fear of the water with the boat sinking are common themes that will come up in the gospel story time and again. Depart from me vs. forsook everything are also common subjects. To me this

demonstrates a well-honed story that has been told time and again with and in the same language which means that it was important to the community and essential to the lens through which they understood what was happening around them as well as to what had transpired in their past. Important; well-honed; the lens they used to interpret life around them. Elisabeth Johnson, Professor of the Luther Institute of Theology in Cameroon, explains “Simon had been fishing all night with no success, then working from the early morning hours cleaning his nets. Most likely he was exhausted and looking forward to going home and getting some sleep. So it must have seemed a bit of an imposition when Jesus got into Simon’s boat and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Nevertheless, Simon did what Jesus asked.

Luke does not tell us what Jesus taught the crowds that morning. The focus is on what follows. Jesus tells Simon to put out into the deep water and let down his nets for a catch. Simon obviously believes this will be a futile exercise. He is the professional fisherman, after all. We can almost hear the exasperation in his voice when he responds, “Master, we have worked all night but have caught nothing.” But then he continues; “Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.’

We know what happens next -- nets so full of fish that they begin to break, boats so full of fish that they begin to sink. Seeing what is happening, Simon is overwhelmed with fear and wonder, sensing that he is in the presence of divine power. He responds by falling down at Jesus’ knees and begging him, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” Simon is caught by surprise. In the midst of his ordinary daily grind, and in fact, after a particularly lousy night at work, he is encountered by one who changes everything. Amazed by the power of God displayed in the abundant catch of fish, Simon is immediately aware of his sinfulness and unworthiness. Jesus responds to Simon by saying, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.’ The Greek word for “catching” used here (*zogron*) is rare in the New Testament, but means “to catch alive.” Of course, fishing with nets was a matter of catching fish alive, but those live fish would soon be dead. Here Jesus calls Simon and his partners to a new vocation of catching people so that they might live, a life-giving vocation of being caught up in God’s mission to all. Although they have just brought in the greatest catch of their fishing careers, Simon Peter, James, and John leave those boatloads of fish behind and follow Jesus. Their encounter with Jesus has completely reoriented their lives.

We can see the way in which the text offers rich possibilities for reflecting on how

God calls ordinary people to discipleship and mission. After all, there is nothing the slightest bit extraordinary about Simon Peter and his fishing partners. They are simple fishermen, and they are simply doing what they did every day. They are minding their own business, cleaning their nets after a long, particularly discouraging night of work, when Jesus comes along, enters into their utterly normal, mundane lives and changes everything. Jesus calls Simon and his partners as they are. Simon is acutely aware of his unworthiness, but Jesus is not put off by this in the slightest. Jesus does not ask Simon to get his act together, his resume prepared, and then come back for an interview. Rather, Jesus encounters him as he is, tells him not to be afraid, and calls him to a new mission of catching people.

Throughout Scripture we see that human sin, failure, and inadequacy are no obstacles to God's call. God calls imperfect people to do God's work, people who are aware of their unworthiness and are often doubting and resistant to God's call. God doesn't wait for them to shape up. God calls them as they are and then works on shaping them into faithful servants.

Simon Peter's resistance to Jesus stems not only from his sense of unworthiness. He initially protests Jesus' instructions to go out into the deep waters and let down the nets because he is convinced that the fish are not biting. They have worked all night and caught nothing. We can hardly blame him for his skepticism.

How often do we resist Jesus' claim on our lives because what he is calling us to do seems too crazy, too impractical? How often do we avoid putting out into the deep waters of following and bearing witness to Jesus because we are convinced that we will not see any results? What might it mean for us to go deep-sea fishing with Jesus -- to trust and follow him outside our comfort zones, to let go of our certainties, to have our lives radically reoriented?

For most of us, this will not mean leaving our current professions behind (although we cannot rule out that possibility). We all are called daily to reorient our priorities to align with God's priorities, to use the gifts God has given us in service to others, to share the good news of Christ in word and deed.

Jesus' mission does not wait until we think we are ready. The need for the gospel in this broken world is far too urgent. We are called right now -- even in spite of our frailty, failures, and doubts, even in the midst of our ordinary, busy, complicated lives. Jesus' word to Simon Peter is also a word to us: 'Do not be afraid.' This is Jesus' mission, and we trust that he will keep working with us and through us, "catching" others as he has caught us -- in the deep, wide net of God's

mercy and love. We trust, finally, that the catch is in God's hands, and that God's desire is for the nets to be bursting and the boats full."^{viii}

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.

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ⁱ <https://www.saltstrong.com/articles/top-10-funniest-fishing-jokes/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.gotquestions.org/fishers-of-men.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.bing.com/search?q=what+type+of+fish+were+in+the+sea+of+galilee+in+jesus%27+time&form=EDG&qs=PF&cvid=da10d62182ba4396a7856ac410a02018&cc=US&setlang=en-US>

^{iv} <https://www.gotquestions.org/fishers-of-men.html>

^v *ibid.*

^{vi} <https://spiritualray.com/what-is-meaning-of-fishers-of-men-phrase>

^{vii} <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/the-old-man-and-the-sea/critical-essays/themes-in-the-old-man-and-the-sea>

^{viii} https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1560