

Meadowbrook Congregational Church
"Fishing With Jesus"
Reverend Arthur P. Ritter
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Matthew 4:12-23

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles
the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned."

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

I will start with a question: Who among us today likes to go fishing? I ask that question only because I want to be aware before I start talking just how many people I might offend with my sermon. I am not much of a fisherman. I do not like fishing. I believe that I have gone fishing four times in my life, once from shore, once from a boat, and twice on a frozen lake. I have to say that my fishing experience has been amazingly consistent. Each time I dropped my line into the water. I waited. Nothing happened. I got bored. I got eaten by mosquitoes. My toes were frozen solid. I caught no fish. I went home.

My fishing experience is similar to that of the great American Daniel Webster. I figure Webster was a wise and reasonable man so I delight in this story. Someone in his town told him of a brook that was supposed to be a great place to catch fish. Webster rode his horse to the home of an elderly man who lived near the brook. The man agreed to guide Webster to the exact place along the water. The spot where the men ended up seemed awfully muddy. But Webster entered the water and soon was up to his knees in muck. He said, "Rather miry here, isn't it?" The guide answered, "Yes I know. But that's the worse part." The mosquitoes soon began to bite. With the hand not holding his fishing pole, Webster was slapping and scratching. He said, "These mosquitoes are pretty thick and hungry." To this the guide responded, "Yes, I know. But that's the worst part." After a few minutes, Webster wiped his forehead and sat down to rest. The heat in the low, damp ground was intense. "It sure is hot out here, isn't it," he said. The guide replied, "Yes, I know. And that's the worst part." Webster then resumed fishing and after an hour's struggle with the heat, the mud, and the bugs, he gave up. He had caught no fish. In futility he said, "There seem to be no fish in this brook!" The guide calmly said, "Yes, I know. Come to think of it, that's the worst part! To me, that story describes fishing.

To be fair to the fishermen out there, I must admit I don't even know much about fishing. I know that even fishing is getting complicated and competitive. There is a bass fishing competition which draws big prizes and a huge television audience. There are fish locators, devices which use science to tell you where to fish. But I would guess that our popular understanding of fishing is that it is a singular pursuit, a one-on-one confrontation between angler (notice I picked up that technical term-angler) and fish. You can put a lot of effort into things, creating your own lures and casting techniques, or you can simply put a worm on a hook, cast your line, and wait. Fishing is still a man against fish pursuit.

In today's Scripture lesson, Jesus goes out into Galilee and calls some ordinary folk, people just like you and me. He asks them to be his disciples, promising them, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." Jesus promised

that those who follow him will work with him in catching people, in leading others to the Kingdom of God. Jesus calls us to go fishing with him and to share the good news of God's love with others.

The poet Don Marquis has written, "Our idea of fishing is to leave all the exertion up to the fish. If they are ambitious, we will catch them. If they are not, we let them go about their business." I think he is quite correct. And I think he may be even more correct when we talk about the kind of fishing that Jesus invited us to do. If people come through these doors we'll try to catch them. But if they live near us, work with us, or go to school with us- we'll probably just leave them alone.

When was the last time you went fishing with Jesus? When was the last time you shared of your faith with anyone else? I would guess that many of us have not had that kind of fishing experience. Perhaps we in the mainline Protestant churches have gotten out of the fishing business. We see fishing with Jesus as something akin to the single angler standing on the river bank casting a line into the stream. We someone notices us and happens to take the bait, we'll drag them onto shore. But it all seems rather uncomfortable to us.

One of my favorite comedians is Steven Wright. He has said that there is a fine line between fishing and standing on the shore like an idiot. Perhaps my fishing problem is that I am too much like the latter. Perhaps this "fishing with Jesus" stuff feels the same way. C. Summer Wemp writes that many churches today "are no longer fishers of men but keepers of aquariums." By this he meant that our primary effort tends to be in taking care of ourselves rather than reaching out and inviting others in. We are not evangelists. We keep quiet about what we believe and about what forms our faith and action. And our silence yields no results.

Most us are probably are not totally comfortable sharing our faith with others. We don't want to impose our religious beliefs upon another. We know from experience how invasive that can be. We don't want to get lumped with those of religious intolerance. We don't want to be labeled as those who profess to have the one and only answer. But could it be that our fear of being pushy leads most of us to say nothing about what we believe. We tend to segment our lives into secular and religious sectors, carefully sealing off from others the religious part where faith might be an important influence.

Yet as little as I know about fishing, I do know that the fisherman of Galilee were not interested in catching fish with easy answers or self-righteous threats. They cast nets out with good news. William Loader writes that "Jesus call was not about scalp hunting but about seeking people to follow. It was about engaging them in the vision and agenda of the kingdom, something which would widen their horizons, taking them to unfamiliar and dark places, but with light and compassion." That sounds like good fishing strategy to me! Casting out with words and example how God's people are supposed to be. Defining for others in clear terms what makes us maintain our hope and live our lives with promise in a world that often functions differently.

Piedmont College's Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "There are a million ways to proclaim the good news, and we sell God short when we forget that, when we try to force ourselves into a narrow mold or fall silent because we cannot. Every now and then we may be called upon to stand up in some public place and give account for the hope within us, but nine times out of ten our evangelism will be the quiet kind: reading Psalms to a sick friend, telling the truth to someone who has asked for it"writing a note that restores hope"those are all proclamations of the good news."

As followers of Christ, it is up to us to fish in the sea that is our world. Our nets or lines are made of the fibers of the gospel that are challenge, encouragement, and imagination. Our bait is always the promise of God. There is nothing wrong about reaching out to others with something that brings the power of forgiveness, that offers the support of prayers and presence, that lifts the fear of death, that works for peace locally and globally, and that cuts through hatred, prejudice and suspicion. It seems to me that offering to others these things is a most faithful response to the call to the fishers of God's people. It is as theologian Walter Bruggemann says, "inviting people into the stories of the gospel, stories that we use to define our own lives, and authorizing others to give up, abandon, and renounce the other stories that have shaped their lives in false and distorting ways."

Fishing with Jesus. Preaching the good news. As we find ways to mature in our own faith, deepen our own spirituality, and broaden our own religious imaginations we can make Gospel lines that we can cast into the sea around us. When we nurture the Christ that is in us, and the Christ that can be found within this community, we

strengthen the nets that we can use to catch others with the good news. When we model an inviting faith and when we do what must be done to create an inviting community, we will find the kind of bait that attracts all of those who have come to us seeking the good news of Christ that is needed.

Jesus has called us so we might call others. We don't have to be perfect. We can sometimes fail. But we are called to be faithful- faithful in casting the line into the water around us, faithful in reaching out and calling others to serve God with us.