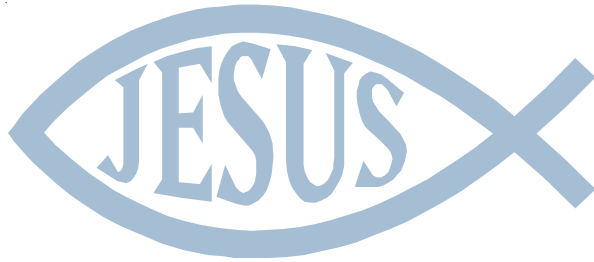


“Fishing with Jesus”

Jonah 3; Mark 1:16-20



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Last year when I turned sixty a fishing buddy of mine sent me a plaque that sort of summed up his philosophy of faith and life. Here's what it said: Jesus said: 'Go fishing.' (Luke 5:4) He said nothing about fixing the sink, mowing the lawn, walking the dog, painting the trim, washing the car, cleaning the garage, or weeding the garden. This is the same guy who is fond of quoting other authoritative sayings like:

- Early to bed, Early to rise, Fish all day, Tell big lies!
- Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day...Teach a man to fish and he will be gone every weekend.
- Good things come to those who bait.

His favorite scripture is ...

- “My ROD and my REEL, they comfort me” (St. Peter 12lb test)

His favorite prayer is ...

- Lord, help me to catch a fish so large that even I, in telling the truth of it, never need to lie.

At least my friend got one thing right: fish and fishing are central images in the Christian faith. Did you know that a fish was the earliest symbol of Christianity? When Christians were being persecuted for their faith during the early Roman era, they would draw a fish in the sand pointing the way to the place they could meet other Christians in secret. You would walk in

that direction until you found another fish sign that led you to an underground church. But there is more: if you take the first letter of the following words in the Greek language, Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior, you get the Greek word, ICTHUS, which means fish. You often see a simple drawing of this fish on car bumpers and in yellow page ads. It simple means that person is identified as a Christian.

So it should come as no surprise that when Jesus called his first disciples he used the metaphor of fishing. Remember the story in the opening chapter of Mark's Gospel? Two fishermen by the names of Simon and Andrew were just minding their own business that day long ago on the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee was actually a big lake, thirteen miles long by eight miles wide. It was a day like another day. The two had been casting their nets into the sea, hoping for a good catch.

These were not just weekend fishermen; it was their livelihood, their way of life. So there they were day after day, doing the things that took up most of their waking hours; trying to eek out a living for themselves and their families.

When Jesus comes along passing by the Sea of Galilee. The Gospel tells us he was proclaiming the good news of God and saying, “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news of the gospel.” Jesus looked at Simon and Andrew and said, “Follow me and I will make you to fish for people” (Mark 1:17) and here's what is absolutely astounding: Mark says that “immediately they left their nets and followed him.” A few verses later Jesus comes across two other fishermen, James and John, who were in a boat with some others, and we're told that “Immediately he called to them; and they left their Father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him” (Mark 1:20)—apparently all without a backward glance.

If there's something for us to pay attention to here, it's that these four fishermen swallowed Jesus' invitation hook, line, and sinker – to stay with our fishing metaphor. And the question some of us are asking is “Why?”

Was it just because Simon and Andrew and James and John were extra-gullible men? Was it because they were bored with their jobs and were ready for another kind of adventure? Or, was it because there was something so compelling, something so winsome about the call of Jesus that they just couldn't resist?

Every time I hear this story I'm reminded of when our children were little and would love to watch Sesame Street. Our son Adam was about four when he learned to tell time from watching Mr. Rogers and Sesame Street. He figured out that Mr. Rogers was a half hour program and Sesame Street was an hour. So when we'd ask him how long he thought an hour and a half was and he would say, “One Mr. Rogers plus One Sesame Street. He really loved Burt and Ernie and one of his all-time-favorite episodes is the one where they go fishing. Let's watch.

Mark almost makes it sound like Jesus uses a similar technique to Bert and Ernie in calling the disciples. Pretty amazing when you think about it. James and John, Simon and Andrew didn't know, they couldn't have known, at that point in their lives, who Christ really was or where their choice to follow him would lead, and yet somehow they responded to his invitation with an unequivocal “Yes!”

What I like about the story Mark tells is that these four fishermen were such ordinary people. We're not talking about the lifestyles of the rich and famous here. These were very poor people; each probably thought to himself, “Hey, I don't have a lot to offer. What you see is what you get. But I'm willing to make myself available so that God can use me.” Simon, Andrew, James and John found the call of Christ irresistible, so when they heard the call to follow, they did just that. To continue the fishing metaphor), “they were hooked!” But notice the rest of what Jesus says, “Follow me and I will teach you to fish for people.”

What's that all about? Did they even have a clue that with discipleship would come a new vocation? Once they said yes to follow Christ, did they understand they were now to fish for people? Wouldn't it be great if they just yelled out “Heeere fishy, fishy, fishy” and people would come flying? If only it were that simple. As the old song goes “Call me, don't be afraid, you can call me Maybe it's late, but just call me Tell me and I'll be around.”

In my experience, there is a little more to it than that. There is something called “free will” or should I say, “self-will.” We are all free aren't we? Free to say “yes” and free to say “no.” Or perhaps, “maybe later, I'm just a little busy right now.”

That seems to be what Jonah did. One of the reasons I like this Old Testament book so much is not just because it's a fish story but because the character of Jonah is so real that we can

all identify with him. Jonah was about the most reluctant evangelist that ever lived. Look at how resistant he was to responding to God's call. God said "Go to Nineveh and preach to the people." At first he avoided going to Nineveh by boarding a ship heading in the opposite direction. God caused a great storm and Jonah was thrown overboard and swallowed by this huge fish that dropped him off on the shores of Nineveh. When Jonah finally began preaching to the people, there was nothing winsome or attractive about his message—but look what happened: the whole city heard the Word and was converted.

Sometimes we think we don't have the right stuff to be God's representative. But God can use us despite our limitations. This is not rocket science, friends. In fact, we can discover several principles about how to fish for people from simply observing how good fishermen and fisherwomen go about catching the fish they do. You've heard the say, "Ten percent of the fishermen catch 90% of the fish. Well what are some of the marks of an effective fisher?

1. You've got to love it. It has to be in your blood. You have to be dedicated to it. To live in that wind, rain, cold and sleet, it has to be in your blood. That's what seasoned fishermen will tell you. You have to be willing to get up at four in the morning. The best salmon and steelhead fishermen are out on the water before the sun comes up. The Lazy fishermen come out at eight or nine. You have to be a little nuts to do get up so early. But if you really want to catch fish, that's what you do. You have to be dedicated to the task. Your dedication grows out of your love.
2. Another mark of a good fisher is that you have to know the fish – where they hang out, what they're like, when they're likely to bite. You have to know the good holes where they can be found. The hot spots. The fish are there; that's not the problem; there are hundreds and thousands of fish in the water down below you, but how to catch them is another matter. You have to learn that information from other fishermen or past records. You have to know the fish.
3. Another mark of a good fisherman is that you have to have patience. Patience. You need to learn to sit patiently and wait and wait and wait, trying different lures, different fly patterns, different depths, different parts of the water. In fact, there's a fly shop over in Central Oregon where I used to get my fishing supplies. Know what it's called? "The Patient Angler." You don't have to tell good fishermen about patience; they live with patience.

Those are some of the marks of a good fisherman. The good news is that it doesn't take a lot of fancy equipment. What is the simple equipment you need to be successful? It's having a love for God in your heart, and a willingness to love people. So how do we "call" others into a relationship with Christ? Are we to go out on the street and yell at people as they pass by, handing out Bible tracts to everybody we meet, telling them they'd better get saved or they're going to hell? That would probably be as effective as going out on a lake with a boatload of rocks and proceeding to toss them overboard one by one, trying to hit fish on the head so they'll just float up to the surface. But what would happen? They would just scatter in fear.

There is another way to catch people. Paul says to the Romans, "Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of God" (Romans 10:17). You don't shout at them; you earn the right to be heard by loving them. It's all about relationships that you develop over time with friends, neighbors, co-workers, family members.

The beautiful thing is that you can "fish for people" within your own sphere of influence. Beyond that it's using the same principals that are used to catch fish. It's remembering that there are times and places when the fishing is hot; when people are more spiritually open and hungry for God. Here are three "Hot Times"—

1. One "hot time" is when a couple is preparing for marriage; especially since they have experienced so much divorce among their family members and friends. Or maybe they've gone through a divorce themselves and are looking at what it takes to make a relationship last. Whenever we get a call from someone in the community who is looking for a place to hold their wedding, a pastor meets with them to form a relationship and describe a process of pre-marriage counselor we call "Great Beginnings." We continue to meet together over the next several months leading up to their wedding ceremony. And among the subjects that we explore are the spiritual dimensions of a relationship. We create an environment where young couples are receptive and open to hear God speak to them.
2. Another "hot" point relates to families with young children. 77% of the so-called "unchurched" want their children to learn about God. That number is incredible, if you stop to think about it. In our crazy, mixed up world that seems

saturated with violence, sex, and drugs, parents are looking for safe, healthy alternatives for their kids. Many people join churches looking for vigorous youth ministry because they are worried about the future of their children. They want them to receive positive nurture and sound moral teaching so they can navigate through the choppy waters of adolescence. They know that if they delay until their children reach their teens to start them on this path, they will often resist. So parents wisely start them on a spiritual track early in life; making their spiritual development a priority.

3. A third "hot spot" is when people experience a spiritual emptiness. When some personal crisis has happened that reveals a need for God, for Christ to live inside of a person. In our materialistic, fast-paced society, it doesn't take long before someone realizes that something very basic is missing. We need to be sensitive to these times. It was Jesus who said, "The sick are the ones who know their need for a physician. Those who think they are well do not go to a doctor." People in crisis are the ones who are most open and receptive to the Great Physician.

Those are a few hot spots you can look for when you think about approaching others.

But even a great metaphor like "fishing" has its limits and we should probably ask ourselves in what ways this metaphor fits with our understand of the mission of Christ. For instance, when real fish get caught they lose their freedom, right? Fish that are caught usually die and get eaten! So it's important to remember that Jesus caught people to set them free. He wants to free us from sin, guilt, shame, emptiness, hopelessness, powerlessness, and addictions. He sets us free to love, free to experience life as it was meant to be lived.

When we know Christ not only are we more alive in this life, but the gospel frees us from our fear of death and dying. Because Christ won the victory over sin and death in his rising from the dead, death itself is no longer the final word. Paul said, "Whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the living and the dead" (Romans 14:8-9).

How easy it is for us to forget what draws people to the church of Jesus Christ in the first place, namely their hunger for an authentic encounter with God, one which has a transforming effect on their lives. The fish are hungry, you see. That's why we go fishing with Jesus! 6