

## **FISHERS BEWARE**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

February 4, 2007

Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-13; Luke 5:1-11

We all know that Jesus taught on the road. He was an itinerant preacher. A sawdust trail evangelist, except the sawdust was desert sand as he traveled from Galilee to the Jordan and into Judea.

And as happens when you're *on the road*, he spoke in places unexpected, wherever he could find a venue. Last week we read the story of his preaching in the synagogue and how it got him into trouble with the locals in his hometown of Nazareth. There they were so enraged with him that they tried to end his career prematurely. Elsewhere in Galilee, we know that he preached a sermon on a mountainside with the crowds all around. And Luke also describes a sermon Jesus preached in a field where people had gathered from all Judea and Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. But in Luke's fifth chapter there is a unique location for a sermon and a surprising outcome that is recorded.

It takes place by the Sea of Gennesaret where a large crowd had gathered to hear Jesus speak. Luke tells us the multitudes were so large that they were closing in on him like some celebrity arriving on the red carpet. As a result, he was forced to borrow the boat of a nearby professional fisherman, one Simon Peter by name. Simon agreed to stop mending his nets and push off shore just a little way, allowing Jesus to speak to the people nearby on the beach.

Robert Schuller back in the 1950's, long before the Crystal Cathedral, used to stand on the stage of a drive-in theater and hold his Sunday morning services there. He met people where they were in those days, and met a need that was new. People didn't have to dress up for church any more. They could just wear their t-shirts and shorts and go right to the beach afterward.

But Jesus was way ahead of Schuller, taking the Word of God out of the synagogue and into the common life and gathering places of people, even to the beach, and there, in a boat, by the seashore, he began to teach the multitudes.

When he had finished, Jesus told Simon to put out a bit farther into the deep water, and let down his nets. Now Simon was an experienced hand at fishing that lake. He knew the well-stocked deep water locations and the shallow dead ends. He knew when the fish were running and when they were not. He had spent many a day and night out there, knew every narrow, navigated every rock, could tell when to head into shore with a storm coming up, which side of the boat to throw off his nets and how to mend them when they hauled up heavy or snagged on the rocks below. He knew all there was to know about fishing that lake. He had made a living of it for some years, thank you very much.

All of a sudden along comes a young rabbi, a man barely with a beard, whose only real experience with the lake was probably a skinny dip on a hot afternoon in the summer. But here he was telling Simon where to put down his nets for a good catch.

Once, a number of years ago, I decided to change the spark plugs in my car. I went to the local automotive supply store, bought what I thought were the right plugs, took out the old ones, put in the new, and felt good about being so handy and saving money. The car rode a bit rough, the engine sputtering, not the way it should. So I took the car to the local gas station and talked to the mechanic; told him I'd changed the plugs recently so it couldn't be that, and together we looked under the hood to see what might be going on.

After twisting a little of this and pulling on a little of that, the mechanic wiped his hands on an oil rag, squinted his eyes, looked up at me and asked, "What line of work are you in?" And I said I'm a minister up at the Presbyterian Church." And without hesitation, he said, "I'll do you a favor, preacher. I'll stay out of your pulpit, if you'll stay out from under this hood." It was flawless advice.

Maybe something of that was on Simon's mind when Jesus, the young carpenter of Nazareth, suggested a good spot for Simon to put down his nets.

"We've worked all night long and haven't caught a thing," Simon said to Jesus, "but if you say so, preacher, we'll give it a shot."

As it turned out, the young carpenter from Nazareth knew a thing or two about fishing that Simon had never imagined. And when they put down their nets there were so many floundering and flopping in the ropes that they had to call for help because the nets were beginning to break.

Unlike my mechanic, Simon Peter was a bit overwhelmed at this miraculous draught of fish and he fell on his knees, realizing that something more than catching fish was going on here, and he said, "Get away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." But Jesus, non-plussed by the whole thing, as if it had unfolded exactly as he had expected, said, "Do not be afraid, from now on you will be fishing for people." And Luke adds, when they brought their boats to shore they left everything and followed him.

This is an amazing story, one quite stunning in its effect, and it's hard to find parallels in our own work that translate easily at the literal level.

In contemporary terms it might play out like this: you're doing some investment research at work and you've been following one or two particular technology stocks for several years, sure that they were going to grow, but all this time they've been under performing, and your bosses aren't pleased, wondering whether you are just wasting your time and theirs. Along comes Jesus who says, "Move everything into this oil stock," and as soon as you do it takes off and doubles and triples and quadruples in value as if your move was what was lacking.

The point is not that Jesus can do our job better than we can. I don't think, for instance, that Jesus comes to Simon to show him up as a fisherman. He comes to Simon Peter because Simon is empty, because he has nothing to show for his work, at a time when he is tired of having put in long hours and lengthy days, "working all night," as Peter says, "and catching nothing."

Man, I can relate to that. You walk into the office at 7:30 in the morning with a cup of coffee and a muffin in your hand, and there are already a pile of telephone calls to return, two hundred emails that arrived overnight, and you have appointments all day,

hardly have time to breathe, much less go to the bathroom. About 11:00 somebody shows up at the office unexpectedly and you realize that you forgot to enter that appointment in your calendar, and you have to stop what you're doing and be inviting and hospitable even though you can barely recall the name of the person with whom you have made the appointment.

You work through dinner and try to catch up with all the stuff you didn't do during the day, and send out a few emails, and you look at the clock and suddenly its 10:00 at night and you haven't gone home yet.

Finally you get there, and look at the blinking light of the telephone answering machine at home, and you don't have the heart to listen, you just go to bed exhausted, setting the clock for 5:45 a.m.

Running on empty most of the time. We all know what it is that Simon Peter is talking about when he says, "Lord, we've been fishing all night and we haven't caught a thing."

Jesus comes to him and offers a larger vision, a greater enterprise. He fills the boat with fish, and in the filling, Peter and James and John realize that fishing is only a means to an end, not an end in itself. There is more to life than the smell of fish on your body at night and the calluses on your hands from the ropes. So when Jesus invites them to follow him, they do.

The story, however, is not remembered as a fish story, *the miraculous draught of fish* as many commentators have described it. As encouraging as the news is that God comes to us at work precisely at that point when we feel most empty, that is not what the story is finally about, either. And certainly it is not a blanket call for any who are unhappy in their work to enter the ministry as an alternative. Ministry can burn you out too.

No, it's a larger story than just Peter's and James and John's entry into more satisfying employment. They don't give up fishing, after all, they just fish differently.

In the final analysis, this is a story about the church and the call to bring others into the boat, to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

If you listen to the gurus of church growth, the evangelical pastors who are leading mega churches in the exurbs of Arizona and California and Texas and even in midtown Manhattan, growth is what it's all about. And whether your approach is to scare the bejeezus out of people as the Left Behind folks like Tim LaHaye are doing, painting threatening pictures of divine body snatching and rapture redemption, or the generous orthodoxy of a Brian MacLaren who describes an emerging church movement more compassionate than contemporary evangelicals are known to be, there is a lot of attention being paid to the best way to fish for others these days.

You know I have always felt a little skittish about that image of fishing for others. Fishing is after all a seductive and entrapping exercise, in which the object of desire is lured onto a steel hook through the mouth. Even the beauty of fly-fishing, which is beautiful and artistic, is still meant to attract the unsuspecting creature into a catch that is more fun for the angler than it is for the trophy.

I have never thought that the analogy of fishing for people worked as well in contemporary North American life as it once might have in the ancient Israel sea economy of the first century A.D.

After all, the point of fishing is either to feed yourself and others, or to mount a carcass and claim bragging rights, unless, of course, you let the fish return to the sea somewhat bloodied and torn for the sport. A direct parallel to human beings is not very appealing.

The point is not to take the image too literally, but to take the spirit of Jesus' words spoken to those fishermen 2000 years ago, using the images with which they were familiar, and understand that as with any comparison, at some point the analogy breaks down.

What I think Jesus would want us to know is that in the same way that we have been invited into a fellowship in his name, to be instructed by the scriptures which reveal God's word, and into a community in which something of the love of God is imparted, it would be the height of selfishness to keep something that good and important all to ourselves.

We are meant to share good news. To give account to others of the hope within us. To invite others into the joyful understanding that God loves them, and that there is a place for them in the kingdom of heaven.

There's more to it, of course... the disciplines of the Christian life... prayer and worship and studying scripture and doing good deeds, and becoming a part of a particular community that celebrates Christ's love, living the life that Christ showed us we can live more joyfully.

All of that comes too, but first comes an invitation to hear good news and to receive it as your own. That is what it is to fish for others. In a word, Jesus invited us to reach out to others, to cast a net of invitation, and bring others into the boat that is his body, the church.

But be advised. If we take the story seriously (and we should) there is something we need to know. Fishing is not a task without its risks. When Jesus urged Peter and the others to let down their nets and be ready to haul in an abundance of fish, before they knew it, they had gotten into trouble. Bringing on fish can capsize the boat, especially if your nets are not up to the task. Remember in the story, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break, and they had to signal their partners to come and help them lest their boats go under.

There is something about the church, every church, even our church, that wants to maintain stasis. Keep everything just the way it is. Hold the course, don't make any changes. Don't rock the boat.

If you open the doors of the church, people who have been around 20 years, 10 years, 5 years, even a year or two will start saying, "Who are all these other people? We got here first."

When more fish are added to the boat, there is always a bit of chaos and lots of danger, too. Sometimes you have to get help. Sometimes you take on water. Sometimes

you're overwhelmed and your arms ache from hauling in the nets, and rowing toward shore, and keeping things balanced. It's hard work, this fishing. And we thought it was all about success and growth and adding new members.

The risk of bringing on new life, is risk to yourself. Any mother can tell you that this is the case. You risk your life in order to give life, for the sake of the one you bear, welcoming one you do not yet know, but whom you are prepared to give up life itself in birthing.

We are very fortunate in this church to be experiencing growth in membership and increasing life. But it is also a challenging time. A risky time. Long time members bring experience and knowledge and love of the church. They have friends that they have treasured for years. It's easy to keep just to the friends you know and feel as if those who are new are always visiting, no matter how long they are here.

And those who are new are just getting acclimated, and they bring all kinds of ideas and great hopes, and the enthusiasm of new commitment. They need to be welcomed and received and integrated into the life of the congregation. Find a place where they can flourish and grow.

And some have been on the boat for a little while and came with those good ideas and great hopes, but they haven't been realized yet, and they are starting to wonder whether the fellowship that they first experienced was an illusion. They ask for more attention. More Bible study. More fellowship events. More opportunities to meet and know others.

Fishing is a risky business. To bring new fish on board you have to be ready to sink. To risk much for the sake of fulfilling your calling. But we should not be afraid. The church is constantly dying and rising again, just as our Lord has shown us is the rhythm of our resurrection hope.

The good thing is that there is one on board who is confident even when we are not. One who is able even when we are overwhelmed. One who is at peace, even when we feel displaced or crowded out, or too tired to try any more. The one who bids us push off shore, let down our nets, trust in him and follow. Even Jesus, the great head of the church.

I have good news for you today. It's not our church. Not our church to save or to sink, not ours to keep on shore, nor ours to fear for the sea, not ours to worry about what lies ahead, nor to grieve what lies behind, for Jesus is the one who is captain of the ship, and he will lead us on, to that place where the water is deep and the fishing is good, and the risks are likely, but so is the promise that when we are aboard, so is he.

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