

Going Fishing: Cast Your Nets into the Deep Waters Sunday, 6/18/17

1 Just about everyone has some fishing stories to tell, even me. It's been decades since I've cast out a fishing line, but seeing pictures like this one of my daughter Carolyn, from many years ago, reminds me of the excitement of catching my first Northern, or the time my dad, brother, and I spent a week on Lake of the Woods, catching and eating our lunches, and then going out again to fill up our stringers. Do you have a favorite fishing story? Raise your hand if you do. {Pick someone to come up and give a 1-minute or less fishing story}

As fun as it is to share our fishing stories, they can actually get in the way of our understanding of the many fishing stories in the Bible. For example, when we say we're going fishing today, we always assume that it's recreational fishing. Sure, some of us eat what we catch, but by and large almost everyone here who fishes does so for the fun of it. Is there anyone here today who's a commercial fisherman? That's probably a tough calling to live out in Buffalo! Also, although there are some examples of fishing with a line and a hook in the Bible, most of the fishing was done by net.

Today we begin a new worship series entitled "Fishing Stories." Why did Jesus call so many fishermen as his apostles, and why did fish, fishing, and water figure so prominently in his teaching? Is there anything about these fishing stories that can speak to us today, even those of us who have zero inclination to go anywhere near those slimy, spiny, stinky fish?

2 We begin our series this morning with "Cast your nets into the deep waters," an allusion to the instruction Jesus gave to Peter and the others in Luke 5: "[G]o out where it is deeper and let down your nets." (Luke 5:4, NLT). Before we get too far into that fishing story, let's acknowledge that all the Bible's fishing stories necessarily involved water. Apart from the flood, water in the Bible has particular life-giving significance. Here's one example of that from the Old Testament book named for the prophet Ezekiel. I'm reading selected verses in chapters 40 and 47.

{Read Ezekiel 40:1-4; 47:1, 6-10, 12, NLT}.

3 Ezekiel was a prophet God called to offer hope to Israel as they faced defeat at the hands of the Chaldeans and their subsequent exile to Babylonia in 586 BC. At the core of the hopeful imagery in Ezekiel's vision is water. What you see here is one of the tributaries to the Jordan River. Have you ever sat down on the banks of a mountain stream like this and

put your feet in the icy and refreshing water?

One of the things about this picture that I like is how much green plant life there is on either side of the river. In the vision given to Ezekiel, not only were there life-giving fruit trees along the river, but the river itself was teeming with fish, even in the Dead Sea. Has anyone here been to the Dead Sea in Israel? There's so much salt in the Dead Sea that it's quite literally dead in terms of animal life. And yet, Isaiah writes, "Everything that touches the water of this river will live!" (Ezekiel 47:9, NLT). And in what to me is the most interesting part of this prophetic vision, fishermen are a part of it! In this hopeful vision for Israel's future, and our future, it's who God brings life where previously only death was found. We are the ones who are blessed with the labor of gathering in the fish.

Ezekiel's vision brought hope to Israel, and God is still in the business of offering hope to us today. Maybe you're feeling a little parched today in the area of hope. My prayer for you is that the living water of Jesus refreshes your soul today.

4 Next week we'll diving deeper into what it means to be "fishing for people." (Luke 5:10, NLT), but today let's get a little perspective on fishing in Biblical times. Because most of the fishing in Biblical times was commercial, most of it was done as efficiently as possible, which means with nets. That's true today as well, by the way. Sometimes the nets were lowered from the side of a boat, which is why Jesus instructed Peter and his friends to "let down your nets." Sometimes the nets were cast out, either from the shore or from a boat. Cast-net fishing required that someone dive into the water, either to collect the fish trapped under the net or to gather up the net around the trapped fish.

Fishing back then was tougher than today, and not only because they didn't have fish finders. Ray Vander Laan points out that "Fishermen worked year-round in the heat of summer and the cold of winter, often at night." (<https://www.thatttheworldmayknow.com/they-left-their-nets-behind>). They didn't have industrial strength nylon nets, so they had to meticulously repair and dry their nets after each outing, including replacing the little stone weights that were attached to the nets. Have you ever noticed that four out of the twelve original disciples were fishermen? Perhaps Jesus knew that fishermen were ideal disciples, used to working long hours and used to work that sometimes produced no visible results.

5 Let's go deeper into the story from Luke 5 now. The Sea of Galilee today is about

forty feet at its deepest, with an average depth of closer to twenty feet. Why do you suppose Jesus told the disciples to go out into the deeper water before they let down their nets? Here's what professional fisherman Bill Dance has to say about deep water as it related to bass fishing (www.billdanceoutdoors.com/bills-blog).

[M]ost of the time...a location provides better fishing because deeper water is nearby. Regardless of what it is, structure or cover, — more times than not, the most productive fishing locales will be associated with deeper water. Even when bass are extremely shallow, they'll normally select areas close to deeper water. And there doesn't have to be a major difference in depth either. Three feet isn't deep, but it's deeper than 1 foot. About the only time bass deviate from this is during the spawning period. Even when bass are deep, they'll select and use those places close to even deeper water when available. Why? It's a built-in instinct — an escape route into deeper water.

I wonder if there's something happening in your life right now that has you worried or afraid, feeling like there's nowhere to go and nobody to run to. You're invited to find security in the deeper water, drawing closer to Jesus. Jesus himself said, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." (Matthew 7:7, NIV). That's not always easy to do. I remember once going through one of my own "dark nights of the soul" when I couldn't sense God presence no matter how hard I tried. I leaned heavily on others during those days. And that's why we need each other, church- because when we can't find the hope or faith that we need to go deeper with God, there's always someone else in the church who will lend us some of theirs!

6 At the very beginning of our fishing story in Luke, the disciples faced an obstacle in going deeper with Jesus. They had already come back to shore from a long night on the lake and were exhausted. Not only had they been skunked, but they probably had that same feeling that you have when you come back from a week of camping- you just want to get home, take a shower, and take a nap in the shade. Remember that the disciples didn't have outboard motors, so going out into the deep waters of the Sea of Galilee and coming back again would have required some time and work. We read through those lines of the Gospel so quickly that we just assume that it all happened easily and quickly. It didn't.

I wonder if you can think of anything in your life, and especially in your life as a

follower of Jesus, where you've been wanting to make a bigger catch but you just haven't taken the time or made the effort to go out to the deeper waters? Just about anything worth doing requires effort and practice. If you play on a sports team you know that. If you're a student you know that. If you're a parent you know that. You may be tired, but Jesus wants you to go to deeper waters, because it's only there that God's dream for who you are can begin to take shape. Draw closer to the one who says to you, "[Y]ou will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:29-30 NIV).

7 When Jesus told the disciples to go out to the deeper waters, even though Peter grumbled a little, one thing he did not say was, "but I don't know how, Lord!" Peter and his company were professional fishermen who knew every bay and sounding of that lake. I'm sure they navigated the boat to deeper waters with skill and confidence. Little did they know how much they had to learn about navigating the waters of faith! They thought it was all about the fish, but Jesus was creating a real-time parable in order to draw them into deeper faith waters.

I wonder if we in the church find ourselves in a similar situation. We often come to church either having been working or thinking about going to work, whether at home or at a job site. Many of us come to church exhausted, and some of us come to church discouraged. Most of us understand at some level the importance of worshipping together, the importance of making sacrificial offerings to God, the importance of meditating on God's Word, the importance of prayer, and the importance of living our faith out loud by loving others through thought, word, and action. But as anyone who's ever tried to lose weight can tell you, there's a big difference in knowing something and mustering up the strength and discipline to do it. It's so easy to stick close to the familiar shores rather than strike out fearlessly for the deeper waters. But it's in the deeper, uncharted waters of following Jesus that we paradoxically find the strength to go deeper.

Let me suggest one way to go deeper today. For those of you who are able to spend some time outdoors on your feet, Martyn Dikken has recently upgraded the prayer labyrinth that's located behind the church building. The paver stones have been highlighted in white to make them easy to see. And if you're not able to walk the labyrinth, we have a paper labyrinth for you in the lobby that you can walk with your finger as you pray.

The idea behind a prayer labyrinth is to engage more of your body and your senses in prayer. While there are many ways to use a labyrinth, something I've done is to slowly walk through the labyrinth while praying simple "arrow" prayers, like: "Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." You might say, "less of me" with every exhale and "more of you" with every inhale. Albert Schweitzer loved arrow prayers, his most famous being this: "Here Lord is my life. I place it on the altar today. Use it as you will." Prayer labyrinths aren't for everyone, but I challenge you to try it at least once and see if God doesn't use that change in your habitual mode of prayer to draw you into deeper waters.

7 It's so easy for us to become preoccupied with the mechanics of doing, whether it's ministry or some other task we've been called to, that we forget about the water we're floating on. Nothing we do in this life can have any enduring value apart from the relationship with form with God in the deep waters of our faith. I have a to-do list these days that's longer than ever, and I imagine many of you do as well. Make a point this week of creating some space to rest in the presence of the one who knows you and loves you more deeply than you can possibly imagine.

Please pray with me. *God of the deep waters, you call each one of us by name and you say that we are your beloved children. Thank you for being our refuge in times of trouble, and the living water that gives us the hope, joy, and strength to be fearless and selfless disciples of Jesus. Amen.*



Buffalo United Methodist Church



...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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