

Going Fishing: The Gospel's Final Fishing Story Sunday, 7/16/17

1 How's the fishing going for you? It's been a couple of weeks since I asked, so I'm wondering if anyone here has a story to share about casting out the Gospel net and sharing the Good News with someone, either in word or deed? {Allow for one brief story}

The fishing story I have to share comes to us from Ross Paterson, author of *The Antioch Factor*. It's not technically a fishing story, but just go with it:

On a dangerous sea coast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude, little life-saving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves, went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little life-saving station. So it became famous.

Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and gave of their time and their money and their effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought, and new life-saving crews were trained, and the little life-saving station grew. Some of the members of the life-saving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots and beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now the life-saving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully, and furnished it exquisitely because they used it as sort of a club.

[As time went on,] fewer members were now interested in going to sea on life-saving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The life-saving motif still prevailed in the club's decorations, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club held its initiations...

Can you see where this story is going? The story concludes, "if you visit that coast today, you will find [that s]hipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown." I have a much more hopeful view of the church than that, but I tell you this story because sometimes in seeing the negative we can better view the positive- in this case, what Jesus meant when he said that he would make us "fishers of people." We are commissioned life-savers, with the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation and

healing of the world. And yes, somewhat paradoxically, we too need saving. But all of us, even those who can't swim, are here not just to learn about and talk about sharing the Good News with other people- we're supposed to go out and be the Good News!

2 We're continuing our "Going Fishing" worship series this morning with "The Gospel's Final Fishing Story." Last week I said that one of the most difficult things we can do is to be hopeful in faith, despite what we see with our eyes and despite the skepticism that rises up in our heads and in our hearts. It's always been that way for God's people. Never was that truer for a group of people than it was for the disciples sitting in the boat with Peter in our earlier Bible reading. After deserting Jesus at Gethsemane; after seeing Peter, their "rock," deny Jesus; after seeing Jesus crucified and buried in a tomb, their faith batteries were probably running low. Peter appeared so dejected that he seemed to say something like, "I guess this disciple-making thing is over now that Jesus is dead. I'm going back to the one thing I know how to do. I'm going fishing." The others went along, but even a retreat to what they thought they knew how to do was marked by failure, and they passed the evening without catching any fish- again! Imagine you're one of those disciples and you're witnessing another sunrise that promises another day of dejection and failure. Can you feel it? Have you been there? Is that the way you felt when you opened your eyes this morning? Is that the way you feel right now? Hang in there, because hope is here.

It's astonishing to me that the disciples, not knowing who Jesus was as he stood far away on the shore, nevertheless did as he told them. They cast their net on the other side of the boat. It's almost as if they said to themselves, "We've tried everything else, what do we have to lose?" But this isn't just another one of the many Gospel stories demonstrating the power of Jesus and the dim-wittedness of the disciples. This is the Gospel's final fishing story, a last chance for the newly raised Jesus to appear to his disciples, to give them another lesson in servant ministry, and to give them John's version of the great commission. The story continues now in the Gospel of John, Chapter 21, continuing in verse 15, reading from The New Living Translation.

{Read John 21:15-25, NLT}.

3 I love this picture of Peter jumping into the water when he realizes that it's Jesus standing on the shore. It's so clear that he's about to do a belly flop, right? When was the

last time you were so surprised and excited to see someone that you dropped what you were doing and ran to them, heedless of the consequences? Who would you be willing to do a belly flop for? I think even before Jesus asked the question of Peter, “Do you love me?,” the answer was clear. I think Peter had learned the hard lesson that we have to learn over and over again: It’s not about the fishing, it’s about the one who calls us to fish. Before any of us is fully ready to be in ministry, whether it’s in the church or in the broader world, we need to discover or rediscover this kind of joyful abandon, which Jesus calls our “first love.” Under the old covenant with God, under the Law of Moses, it was duty that required us to be in ministry. Under the new covenant with God, under the grace of Jesus, it’s joy that launches us into ministry, the kind of joy that might lead us to jump out of the boat, belly flop and all, to be with Jesus.

4 I think Jesus wanted to underscore that fact before commissioning the disciples for ministry. I think Jesus knew how many ways we could go sideways in our best attempts at living out our faith. And so Jesus took Peter aside and had what is one of the most famous leadership discipling conversations in the Bible. Did you notice that Jesus didn’t ask Peter if he loved being a disciple? He didn’t ask Peter if he loved the work of ministry. He didn’t ask Peter if he loved the other disciples. He didn’t ask Peter if he loved his synagogue or if he tithed. And he didn’t ask Peter if he loved God’s sheep. Jesus asked Peter if he loved him.

By the way, if the Gospel of John was submitted today as an English senior thesis, I’m convinced the instructor would have marked all over it with red ink. And in chapter 21, she would have written, “mixed metaphors- fishing and shepherding, fish and sheep- choose one metaphor only!” But in a way, the call to ministry that is on all our lives, not just mine and not just Peter’s, really is a mixed metaphor, a strange amalgamation of our lives before we met Jesus and our lives as we grow into the likeness of Jesus. As Albert Mohler (albertmohler.com) points out,

Simon Peter...was a fisherman, not a shepherd by training. He was used to nets and boats and water. Now he is called to feed sheep. These are very different tasks. The fisherman does not stay up at night, protecting his fish from slaughter. He does not lovingly tend the fish, knowing that they will surely perish without a fisherman. As a matter of fact, the fish should rightly fear the fisherman, who hardly takes their personal welfare to heart.

The shepherd has a completely different calling.

5 Peter's appointment to be a shepherd of God's sheep required training in a new heart, a new way of thinking, and a new way of doing things. It did require that Peter love God's sheep, but first it required a recapturing of Peter's first love, his love for Jesus, and a reconciliation with God for past wrongs. In Peter's case, his wrong was his denial of Jesus—not once, but three times. How about you? What's preventing you from reclaiming your first love of Jesus? Is there a past wrong that you need to confess before you reconcile with Jesus? There's no point in letting that kind of burden stand in the way of the joy of being in the presence of the Good Shepherd. Let's go to Jesus right now in prayer.

Spirit of God, you've promised to intercede for us in all things, even when we can't put them into words. Many of us here can think of something that has stained and burdened our relationship with you, our Heavenly Father, and his Son. Some of us can't quite put our finger on something specific, but we know that we feel distant from you. Forgive us our trespasses and renew a right spirit within us, confident in our standing as your beloved. Restore your joy to us, so that we can fully embrace your commission of us as fishers of people and shepherds of your flock. Make us fearless, selfless, and joyful disciples. Amen.

6 Let's look a little more closely at Jesus' Great Commission to Peter. Three times Jesus makes a kind of implied "if-then" statement to Peter that goes basically like this: "If you love me, then you'll love the sheep of my flock by taking care of, tending, or feeding my sheep." Much has been made over the years in various commentaries and Bible studies about different words used in the Greek here for Love, as well as the words for tending, feeding, sheep, and lambs. John Wesley for one believed that the phrase "lambs" was intended to refer to young believers or children. Mostly though, I think these are all stylistic language flourishes that point to the same basic thing: Peter was called to care for God's flock, and that caring was to be characterized by love, the kind of fearless and self-giving love that Jesus himself exemplified as the Good Shepherd, laying his life down for his sheep.

Let's compare this commission with the one found at the end of the Gospel of Matthew (28:19-20): "[G]o and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Isn't that really the same commission that Jesus gave Peter? And

isn't that the same commission he gave to all of us as well?

Feeding or tending sheep or lambs and fishing for people- it all amounts to the same thing. Out of our own love and discipleship to Jesus, we are to go out and make disciples of others- not out of a sense of duty alone, but out of a deep awareness of the loving grace offered to us through Jesus, and a joyful desire to share that love and grace with other people. Our calling to be shepherds or fishers of people is an important duty we perform as disciples of Jesus, but mostly it's to be marked with the fruit of the Spirit, especially love.

7 Where do you find yourself on your journey of discipleship today? There's no wrong answer. Are you one of those fish, still waiting to be caught in the net of the love of Jesus? Are you a lamb, newly born into the flock of God and needing to be hand-fed spiritual milk out of a bottle as your newborn faith begins to grow? Are you a worn-out shepherd, exhausted from living out in the field and tired of trying to be a sheep dog, barking at the sheep to keep them together in one place? Are you a seasoned fisherman or fisherwoman, waking up each day, giving thanks to God for the day ahead, and trusting that each day's journey is a call for you to joyfully receive the grace of Christ and join God in sharing the Good News with all the fish in God's sea? Or are you someone else, entirely unique?

Life is full of mixed metaphors and competing demands for our hearts and our attentions. Where you are on your discipleship journey is less important than that you are on one. Today is a new day, a new chance to recognize Jesus standing on the shore, calling out to you. Today is a new chance to sit at the feet of Jesus and be fed by his Word. Today is a new chance to profess your love for Jesus. Today is a new chance to receive hope. And today is a new chance to take one step forward in feeding God's sheep. There are so many possible things to do, but only one day that lies before us. Resolve to take just one step forward today, any step, in living out your calling from Jesus, as long as you take that step in joy and love.



Buffalo United Methodist Church
...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!



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