

Going Fishing: Jesus Feeds the 5,000 Sunday, 7/9/17

1 This morning's fish story comes to us courtesy of Animal Planet, in an article entitled, "Top Five Tallest Fishing Tales" (www.animalplanet.com/wild-animals/5-putins-big-bass):

When a U.S. president tells a fish story in the interest of diplomacy, it becomes international news. In 2007, President George W. Bush took Russian President Vladimir Putin fishing on a lake near the Bush family compound in Kennebunkport, Maine. According to The New York Times, Putin caught a bass and was photographed in Bush's boat, holding a fish that to "experienced fishing eyes" appeared to be about 20 inches long. By the time the leaders had reached the dock, however, Putin's fish miraculously had grown to 31 inches -- or, at least it must have, since that's how big Bush told reporters the fish was. The controversy drew international media attention, with two Russian TV stations openly doubting the size of Putin's haul. Some speculated that Bush's fib was an effort to improve then tense U.S.-Russian relations, but David DiBenedetto, editor of the fishing journal SaltWater Sportsman, sought to put the Presidential prevarication in an everyman context: "We've all had a non-fisherman on the boat and added a few inches or pounds to his or her catch," he explained.

That's an interesting word: prevarication. Merriam Webster defines it as "to deviate from the truth!" When I grew up, we called that lying. How many of you have ever suspected a little prevarication might be involved in telling a fishing story? That presidential fishing story got me wondering. Just how is it that we come to judge what is true? Is seeing believing? Does believing lead to acting? And if we don't act, does that mean we really don't believe?

2 We're continuing our "Going Fishing" worship series this morning with "Jesus Feeds the 5,000." Did you know that, apart from the resurrection, it's the only miracle of Jesus that's included in all four of the Gospels? The Gospels are the four eyewitness accounts of the life, teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection of Jesus that we have in the Bible from four of the twelve original disciples of Jesus. And yet, people still persist in doubting that these miracles ever happened, suspecting that the Gospel writers engaged in telling some tall fish tales of their own.

Last week you may have heard me talking about the importance of being clear on the “why” of fishing for people before getting down to the how and what. I asked you to do some thinking about why you are a Jesus follower, a disciple, and what it might take for you to become a fisher of people. The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, like every other miracle in the Bible, is mostly an account of the reason behind every “why:” Who is this Jesus? It’s not a story about Jesus rescuing hungry people so much as it’s a story of Jesus revealing himself as the Son of God. What you believe about that miracle has a great deal to say about what you believe about who Jesus was and is.

Our next Bible reading take place in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark immediately after the feeding of the five thousand. Just like the feeding miracles, this miracle is more of a mission of revelation rather than a mission of rescue. As you hear the story, I invite you to ask yourself: “Is this just a tall fish tale? What does my understanding of this story have to say about who I believe Jesus is? What are the implications for my “why?” I’m reading in the Gospel of Mark, beginning in Chapter 6, verse 45, reading from The New Living Translation.

{Read Mark 6:45-56, NLT}.

3 Did you notice the thing that connects this encounter with Jesus on the stormy Sea of Galilee with the feeding of the five thousand? It was right there in the middle, in verse 52: “for they still didn’t understand the significance of the miracle of the loaves. Their hearts were too hard to take it in.” (NLT) I like the way The Message describes their problem: “None of this had yet penetrated their hearts.” Time and time again, Jesus demonstrated to the disciples that he had divine power, but time and time again it was the outsiders who recognized it and the insiders, the twelve, who failed to grasp it. A reading of the Old Testament shows the same pattern, and an honest assessment of the church today begs the same question. Are we, the insiders, the ones who are familiar with how to perform the mechanics of a worship service and what words to use in our prayers- are we really grasping the meaning behind the miracles? Do we know Jesus, Son of God and savior in the full revelation of who he is, or are we simply looking to his miracles for a vague hope in being rescued?

4 One of my favorite web sites to look for everyday explanations of faith matters is

gotquestions.org. Instead of lengthy dissertations, they usually offer one-page answers with plenty of Bible references. For example, there's an entry for, "What does it mean to believe in Jesus?" The most helpful part of this answer isn't the Bible references, but the metaphor of a chair. What's the lesson? It's one thing to say that you believe that a chair will support your weight when you sit on it, it's quite another thing to actually sit down on it. You may never think about sitting down in a chair in the same way again! It's an act of trust that trades the risk of physical injury for the confidence in the strength of the chair. I don't know about you, but there have been a couple instances in my life where my trust in a chair turned out to be misplaced, but for the most part, I believe that most chairs are safe to sit on.

The disciples of Jesus, as they appear in the Gospels, are the perfect illustrations of our own tendency to believe in our heads that Jesus is the Lord of life, the divine Son of God, but then to fall short in putting that belief into action. When it became apparent that the crowds were going to get hungry, the disciples wanted to send the crowds away. Remember, many of these disciples were Jews who were very familiar with the stories of how God miraculously fed the Israelites manna in the wilderness. They were also the same disciples who had watched Jesus heal the lame and the blind. Why is it that they were so quick to shout, "Impossible!" when Jesus asked them to feed the multitude? I think it's because they believed the chair would support their weight, but they didn't believe it so strongly that they were willing to sit in it!

I wonder if you've taken an inventory of your own faith recently. It's ok to do that from time to time, and it's ok to be honest and say, "my faith is really flagging lately." I love the response of the apostles to Jesus when he taught them about God's high expectations for the forgiveness of others. They simply said, "Increase our faith!" It's not a sin to admit that your faith life is in the doldrums. What is a sin- that is, what really separates us from God- is to go on pretending that knowing about Jesus is the same as believing in Jesus.

Halim Suh (austinstone.com) put our dilemma this way:

They understood Jesus miraculously broke the loaves so hungry people would be satisfied. They didn't understand that Jesus Himself was the bread of life and He Himself must be broken so hungry souls would be satisfied. They understood Jesus had power, but didn't understand He was power. They understood Jesus was from God, but didn't

understand Jesus Himself was God... The disciples were always around Jesus, His teaching, and His kingdom work. However, they were still missing who He was. That is the danger we face. There is a way to always be around Jesus without ever really knowing Him.

5 The Gospels never leave us without hope, and so there's good news for all of us thick-skulled, hard-hearted and dim-witted disciples, so quick to doubt Jesus and so slow to see the divine. The good news is that Jesus wants us to see him. It's the why behind his miracles. It's no accident that Jesus fed the crowds, inviting a comparison to Moses before him. It's no accident that Matthew used those same four verbs (took, blessed, broke, gave) to describe how Jesus prepared the loaves and the fish for the five thousand as he did later in Matthew 26 to describe the Passover meal in the Upper Room, on the night he was betrayed, arrested, and began the final portion of his journey to the cross, the tomb, and then resurrection and glorification.

There's a verse in Mark's account of Jesus walking on the water that's always bothered me. At the end of verse 48, we're told that Jesus "intended to pass them by." The Message puts it, "He intended to go right by them." I always wondered why Jesus would bother walking by them without a "hello," or, "Sorry you're working so hard at those oars, can I give you a hand?" But as I studied this text, I came to understand that a better translation might be, "He intended to pass before them." Does that phrase sound at all familiar to you? It's the description of a God who wants to be revealed. In 1Kings 19, God is said to "pass by" Elijah when he revealed himself to his prophet. In Exodus 33, the presence of God is said to "pass by" Moses, a rare privilege of personal revelation for another of God's prophets. But what was rare for the people of the Old Testament is now freely available for us since the coming of Jesus. This scene on the Sea of Galilee isn't an example of a self-absorbed prophet who has no regard for his distressed disciples; it's an example of a God who loves us so much that he'd seek us out in the middle of a stormy sea and pass before us, revealing his divinity in a form that we can relate to- not just once. But every hour of every day.

Notice also something Jesus said to the disciples in the boat. It's so brief that you may have missed it: "It is I." Does that sound familiar? It should, because that's also the language of a God who wants nothing more than to be revealed to God's children. "I am who I am,"

God spoke to Moses from the burning bush in Exodus 3. “I am the way and the truth and the life,” Jesus said in John 14. I am the good shepherd, I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world- the fullness of the glory and divinity of Jesus is so large that no single statement could capture it all, except for perhaps the one he used as he passed by before them in the boat: It is I, I am who I am. The God who loves you is seeking you out, wanting nothing more than to reveal the fullness of God’s love for you and to invite you follow more closely and to grow into God’s image.

6 How do you see yourself in these Gospel stories? Are you one of the crowd who’s asking Jesus to come by again at six to provide another meal? Are you the skeptic who wasn’t there and assumes that this was all a tall fish and bread tale, made up to impress would-be followers? Are you one of the disciples in the boat, so afraid of the presence of Jesus on the water that you forget that he holds the ultimate power over the wind and the waves? Do you really believe that Jesus is who he said he is: the Lord of Life, the good shepherd, the Son of God? If you say that you believe a chair is safe to sit in, if you really believe it, you’ll be willing to sit in it. If you really believe that Jesus is who he said he is, then you’ll be willing follow closely and act as Jesus acted, living each day to its fullest, loving people while also staying close to the love of God. Are you ready to take one more step forward in faith today?

Sometimes the most difficult thing 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. Jesus invites us today to be fearless and selfless disciples, but fearless and selfless are empty without the hope that comes from a certainty in the love God has for us, and the love God has for all of creation.

Please pray with me. *God of the burning bush and the loaves and fish, thank you for revealing yourself in the Holy Scriptures, in your Holy Spirit, and in your holy community, the church. Lord, increase our faith! Lord, increase our faith! Lord, increase our faith! Amen.*



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



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