

SERMON
“Fishing with Jesus”
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St. John’s Chapel UCC

Isaiah 9: 1-4

Matthew 4: 12-23

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”

From that time Jesus began to proclaim. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

SERMON

Our lives are transformed not only by what we affirm, but by what we reject. We are transformed, not only by our spiritual practices, but by how we live our lives. What if Peter and Andrew had not laid down their nets that day? And James and John? What if they had been unwilling to leave the boat or their father? Not just that they did not do it immediately, but never! Well, they would have missed out on the most transforming event of their lives--going fishing with Jesus.

Ever notice how the author of Matthew has Jesus beginning his ministry not by immediately teaching, preaching, or healing, but rather...by calling? Matthew's gospel moves quickly to Jesus's call of his disciples. He calls these ordinary, untrained working people and tells them he will show them how to fish for people. In other words, he will teach them to do evangelism. Then Matthew ends with the *Great Commission* in chapter 28:19; "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

This sandwiching hints to where Matthew wants to take us. As we move into this lectionary year with Matthew, we should also note that Matthew writes to the church that is now in existence. The gospel is a reflection on the church as current day disciples. The Gospel, Matthew says, is meant to be shared. Jesus is calling disciples to be on the move, reaching out and catching people everywhere in the great dragnet of divine grace. For Matthew, the church is God's engine of evangelism; God's means of saving the world is through the words and work of ordinary people like you and me.

The gospel of Matthew is about the “E” word...evangelism; the curse word we do not dare speak at church. Or as Martha Grace Reese put it, “The E word seems to have replaced sex and money as That Which Must Not Be Named in our mainline churches.” “Most people would rather go get a root canal than think about evangelism.”

Me, I’ve never been very big on fishing. Chester used to drag me off to fish with him all the time in Dallas, to some lake where you mainly waited and waited for some fish to make your day. When I got a nibble, I’ll have to admit, it was exciting—but I never had the patience for the long waits between nibbles. Then he introduced me to salt water fishing. Now that was exciting! The bites came often and the catches were big.

When Dean and I visited Yellowstone National Park, fly fishing caught my attention. I thought, “Now there’s a style of fishing I might like.” The beauty of the motion...this is not a passive sport. Plus, trout live in the most beautiful of places in the world. You have to go where they live; they don’t come to you. Getting to see some of the most-beautiful places works for me.

Now, I have been told, there is much to learn to master fly fishing, which is fine. I enjoy a challenge. In order to outsmart a creature with the brain the size of a pea, one must be cognoscent of the temperature of the air and water and the specifics of entomology (en to mol o gy). You have to “match the hatch” using flies that resemble the insects that are hatching at that moment. Then there’s the weight of the line, the length, weight and flexibility of the rod.

You can’t sit alone in your room. You’ve got to put down your knitting, the book and the broom. You must master a score of skills and work at perfecting them. You practice in your backyard, but eventually you have get out and get down to the river. As any good fishing guide will tell you, “A fish is not caught that is not sought.”

Into the fishing world steps our Jesus. He does not come offering a list of benefits that will enrich their lives. No he comes inviting us to go fishing with him: to put down our nets, the pole, and even leave the boats to go catch people with him. In today's scripture, Jesus is no preacher or teacher of some cool philosophy. He is not a representative of some institution or organization seeking recruits to help pay the bills. No, he is calling disciples to help catch people with the good news of the kingdom. He's calling to evangelists.

Being Christian is about following Jesus, even when he enlists us to embrace the E word. Yet, if the statistics of our church and most churches are correct, most of us are not getting into the fishing business with Jesus, and some are even hostile to the idea.

Why? Because we don't like some people's fishing style. We find that most evangelists are offensive. We embarrass at the thought of sharing our faith, so the only skills we know are those about maintaining the "fish" that were once caught long ago, or the children of the children of the "fish" caught eons ago. And we are even losing it when it comes to the maintenance of the children of the children of the original catch.

I could not agree more with William Willimon's statement about us pastors. He says, "We pastors are better at maintaining the congregations that were given to us from the last generation, keeping house with the seasoned "insiders, than going fishing for the prospective Christians in the next generation."

Yet anyone who has been recently "hooked" by Jesus would testify, one of the reasons why they are in the church today is that someone found the "lure"—that word, that presentation, that invitation—that drew them in. Of all the new members in our church, I could not think of one who was the recently "hooked" on what we would consider "the un-church", which is what evangelism is about. It is not about following up on visitors who have been churched all their

lives. Do not get me wrong...this good work is essential, but it is just not evangelism. Evangelism is about sharing our faith with those who have never heard the exciting news that God's kingdom has drawn near. It's about someone finding the "lure"—that word, that presentation, that invitation—that brings them into fellowship with God.

“Alas, too often we think we just need to advertise the time of our services, unlock the doors and do what we have always been doing and the “fish” will just flop up on the bank or jump in the boat and be ours!” To coin a phrase from Dr. Phil, “How is that working for us?”

What are the skills our church needs to give you in order to get you in the fishing business—for according to Matthew, if we are not doing evangelism—we are not Christians. We are transformed into the likeness of Christ not only by our spiritual practices, attending church, praying and reading our Bibles, but by how we live our lives. And that includes saying a good word for Jesus.

So what are the skills we need to start sharing our faith with enthusiasm and theological authenticity? Interestingly, this lies at the core of the sabbatical we will take together this summer. Dale Parson, over a year ago, introduced me to a book by Martha Grace Reese entitled, *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism*. Best thing I've read on evangelism. I had no idea at the time I began to weave it into our shared sabbatical that the liturgical year would place us smack dab in the middle of the *Great Commission* Gospel, the Evangelism Gospel.

The movement has already started in our church. You might pick up subtle nuances of it if you pay close attention, for Martha Grace Reese recommends we operate by stealth. I'm not sure if I understand exactly why, but I'm willing to give it a try. After all, she's the one who's done all the research with the Lilly Endowment fund; the same people who are funding our sabbatical. By the time I leave you in June, hopefully the movement will be in full swing.

I am certain I will come home with great enthusiasm to share how my faith has been enriched. But my biggest hope is that you will greet me with the enthusiasm you have discovered while untying the knots that keep us from living exciting lives in the spirit—that you will have discovered the joy of going fishing with Jesus. This is the call of the story of the disciples—not for just the pastors or leaders of the church, but for all who would be followers of Christ.

Amen.