

Gone Fishing

A sermon by

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Isaiah 9: 1-4

Matthew 4: 12-23

Some sermons have a logical sequential structure. This one is more like spokes in a wheel, radiating from a hub. I want to talk about fishing. Fishing is popular in the south. Someone said we have always had sushi down there, you know, but we used to call it bait!

Peter and the others are fishing in the Sea of Galilee. Using large nets, they would troll the waters looking for fish. This wasn't a pastime or hobby. This was their work, their livelihood. And Jesus says, from now on you will be fishing for people. New work. A new calling in life. We are called to fish for people, which means to tell the good news about Christ to people. And it is work. Let's think about this story.

Peter and others got the call. Jesus walked up and just told them, you are going to go fishing for people. Don't you wish it were always that clear? We don't have the luxury of having Jesus walk up and tell us out loud what we should do. We have to figure it out from the words of Scripture, the witness of the Church, and the voice of the Holy Spirit telling us internally. And when we get the call, it is then another task to figure out what it means. What is fishing for people anyway? Well, let's think about fishing, and see if we have any insights.

Here I tread on thin ice, for I have been fishing about 4 times. One of those times, I was very small. My dad and my uncle went with me to the Black River and there we caught a fish so small it was useless. I was scared of it. Years later, a friend and I went over to Myrtle Beach one Saturday to sit on the pier and watch girls, and to blend into the crowd we had fishing poles. We fed a lot of corn to some very clever fish that afternoon. And we didn't meet any girls! Then I went with some little kids one day from a church in New Jersey. We used safety pins tied by a string to a broomstick, with little chunks of hot dog for bait. I was certain we were in no danger of catching a fish, which was the plan. But one four year old actually caught one, and was horrified by the whole affair. And then I once took my children to a trout farm, where even a three-year-old can hook a fish.

So I don't know much from experience. But let's think about this some.

Fishing is messy. To fish for people, to proclaim the gospel to men and women is messy. We have to get involved in their lives, and peoples' lives are invariably filled with problem and trouble. If it were simple, we would do it effortlessly. But it is hard, having to clean up the messes people make of themselves in order to help them see how much God loves them.

Fishing is slow. People don't appreciate this effort. As soon as you get their mess cleaned up, they make another one. It takes a long time to catch a fish, and it takes a long time to get some people to see their way to drawing close to God. This is a bad thing in a culture that wants instant gratification. My friend had been going to another church on Sunday nights, where several hundred people gathered for singing. They had a band, great music, loud singing. It was a wonderful thing. He wanted the Presbyterians to do that. We didn't have a band -- we had 2 guitars. But we did get about 12 people to come and sing timidly. They didn't know the songs, of course. And my friend got mad and asked, why can't we do what the other church does? I said, because they have been doing it for 25 years. Fishing is slow.

That means we have to have patience. And we don't have patience. We want everything now. We want our churches converted and recharged and active and happy. NOW. We want our friends to come to God and grow into spiritual giants. Now. We want results. And to fish, you have to be patient.

Fishing has a strategy. Some people have a favorite fishing hole, or favorite pole, or special fly or lure. Some people believe you fish in this part of the lake; others say you must go over there. Then there is the pole versus net debate. I remember people using nets at Myrtle Beach trying to catch crabs and coming up with little sharks! What this a good strategy?

Well, transfer this to fishing for people. Someone once called it the rifle versus shotgun approach. It is pole versus net. We can go after one fish, or a whole lot of fish. We can try to catch one particular fish or we can grab all of them and sort them out later. So we can do things to lead one person to come meet God, or we can try to bring in huge crowds and see who will respond. Both have their place, but each a very different strategy.

Fishing depends to a great extent on the fish. It is slow, requires patience and strategy. Because it depends on the fish. If the fish don't bite, you can waste a good deal of bait. If the fish are like those under the pier at Myrtle Beach, they can feast on your bait and you never even see them! Are people like that? Well, if we want to get people into the church, we have to see that the decision rests with them, not us. The success of our efforts at fishing for people depends on the people after all. All is not lost, however, for we do have an ally -- the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will work on the people, and bring them in when the time is right.

Fishermen consume what they catch. Fishermen eat their catch. Well, when we are fishing for people we can't consume the people. We can't use them up. Once a young woman went to worship at a church. Someone she met invited her to Sunday school and so she went. Someone else asked her to come to choir; she agreed. When she asked about the afternoon children's program she was recruited to be a chaperone. We figured out the next day that at least six different groups in the church had grabbed this young woman to be a part of their activity. Not surprisingly, we never saw her again. She was going to be used up. Consumed. That is not a good way to fish for people.

Fishermen throw the little ones back. If the fish isn't up to a certain standard, it must be thrown back to let it grow some more. When we are fishing for people we are not supposed to have that policy. We are not supposed to reject the ones who are not up to some standard. No, we are supposed to welcome and rejoice over every one whom the Lord calls, no matter who they be!

Did you ever go fishing in a trout farm? That is a real challenge. The fish are so well fed and so smart, they won't take the bait. The pond is teeming with fish, but they won't bite. That is one of our problems in fishing for people – people have heard it all before. They have heard our story, in one version or another. They have been to some church that alienated them. They don't believe it because of some experience they have had. It is almost like they have been inoculated against faith; and so fishing for people is really hard unless you have some new and interesting bait. To draw people like this into the Church means that we have to find ways to make the gospel fresh without losing its message or its power. And so fishing is indeed a real challenge in our time.

The fish die. You can't have a successful day of fishing without the death of some fish. And so it is with us when God catches us. We die, to rise again in Christ to new life! To go fishing for people is to call them to new life in Christ, which means that they die to all kinds of old life things, like bitterness, selfishness, greed, racism, injustice, hard-heartedness, and so on. To live new life in Christ is to rise out of the water of baptism like a fish on a hook. To live in Christ is to live in love, joy, and peace with God. And so successful fishing for people leads people to new life. Not to church membership, or participation in some activity, or anything else. Nothing less than new life in Christ matters. That is what the fishing is all about. That is our calling.

To review:

Fishing is messy.

Fishing is slow.

Fishing requires patience.

Fishing does have a strategy.

Fishing depends to a great extent on the fish!

And so it is with people, but we are called to go after them! So let us go! Thanks be to God! Amen.