

“Fishing for Humans”

¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the
Gentiles—

¹⁶the 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.’

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’*

¹⁸ 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 lake—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As 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. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

²³ 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. ²⁴So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them.

-- Matthew 4:14-24

My wife and I were riding in the car not long ago, wondering why we hadn’t gone fishing in more than a year. We enjoy fishing, and we’ve promised ourselves that we’d do more of it this year. Noticing the gloomy, cold weather, I remarked that I had been fishing on worse days. She said, “That would be okay if you could know that you’d catch some fish.” Then she paused and said, “No, you’d probably go on a day like this even if you knew you weren’t going to catch any.” I think many

people are that way; it isn't just the catching, though that adds to the enjoyment; it's the fishing we enjoy.

Jesus "caught" Simon, Andrew, James and John before they could "catch" others. They were already fishermen by trade, and they already had some relationship with Jesus. It seems very likely that this moment was the culmination of that early relationship rather than the beginning. It wasn't that these men all became Christians on that day, rather that they moved to a new level in their relationship with Jesus.

At this moment in their story, they weren't prepared to catch people with the Gospel. Even though they were experienced commercial fishermen, they didn't have the tools for "people fishing" already well in hand. Note that the promise Jesus makes to them has two parts: "Follow me," and "I will make you fishers of men," or as Eugene Peterson says in "The Message," "Come with me. I'll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I'll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass." They were called to become "fishers of men."

We don't really know how long it took before these four became skilled at their new trade, although Andrew shows some signs of catching on early. The transformation wasn't instant; they had to learn and grow. As we read their stories in the Gospels, we see that they weren't already brilliant, or gifted, or especially well behaved. What we do find, however, is that they embarked on a new way of thinking about life, one that would require that they change their priorities. One of the interesting

things these four men have in common is their ties to work and family; we know that they fished for a living, and we know their families: James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and the sons of Jonah, Simon and Andrew. In order to even start—not complete, mind you, just to start—the new task Jesus set before them, they had to get past identifying themselves merely in terms of work and family. They had to leave the boats and leave the families, and follow Jesus.

Nevertheless, these and the other Disciples had the best teacher in the world, and they spent quite a lot of time in training, and they finally became known as Apostles, which means “those who are sent.” The church used this word to describe those whose ministry encompassed building communities of Christian faith where there had been none before.

In the modern church, we call this “evangelism,” and some people have made a cottage industry of telling people how to get it done. There is a recognition on the part of today’s Christians, leaders and laypersons alike, that too many congregations are shrinking instead of growing. This is alarming because it means that ministry has to be curtailed, that budgets can’t be met, that staff members can’t be employed; all of these are worthy tasks, but they are all subordinate to the task of evangelism. The real reason we can’t afford for the church to shrink is that it means people out there are having to live their lives without knowing how much

God loves them, and how much better the living of life can be within the relationship between people and God through Christ Jesus.

There are hundreds of books on the subject, many of them applying principles of marketing, advertising, and customer service to the ancient idea of fishing for men. There are systems, and there are programs; there are campaigns and there are videos; there are training programs and workshops. Most of them contain some valuable insight with regard to fishing for people. We are attracted to them because they systematize the process. They make us think, "If we follow this process, we'll be able to get our congregation or our denomination growing again." Churches try these programs fairly often, and spend hundreds of dollars implementing them, but it seems to be a hit-or-miss situation with all the certainty of success that one might have walking into Harrah's Cherokee Casino. Is there something wrong with the programs and workshops? On the contrary, many of them are very helpful.

The real problem is that those of us who inhabit modern churches haven't quite gotten our brains wrapped around the good news ourselves. We certainly have some of it memorized: we know that God loves us, and that Jesus died for us. What we haven't yet mastered is the idea that in order to be successful at fishing for other people, we have to be good and truly caught ourselves. Just as the fishermen had to change their priorities before they could begin the process of becoming Apostles, we also have to shift our thinking about evangelism, even about the role of

faith in our lives, before we can begin the process of catching people in our nets. We have to set aside the issues of institutional survival, like budgets, programs and especially the strange idea that the church exists to meet our needs and make us happy. It is a profound truth of the Christian Church Universal that we are here because a gracious and loving God has already met our needs. At the very heart of our existence in the world is the reassuring voice of the one who made us, reminding us that life can be better than it is, not by fulfilling our desires, but by fulfilling God's desires for us.

What that means, in the end, is that in order to be fishers of men, we must be a community of people who live in the net ourselves. We are people who love our lives, even when our lives are difficult. We are people who love God, even though God doesn't always give us what we think we want. We are people who love our neighbor, even though our neighbors may not care for us, and may even dislike us. We are a people whose lives are grounded in the truth about God, the truth that our creator cares for us and walks with us throughout our lives, and who desires a relationship of love and friendship with us.

This is one of the most important things we can remember about our calling to fish for people: the gospel is communicated to others in the same way it was communicated to us, by an experience of God's grace made available through the lives of ordinary human beings. Our culture is now saturated with shallow and meaningless images of Christianity;

our words alone will never persuade anyone to want to be one of us.

Those outside the church watch our every move; they are hoping to catch us in some hypocrisy, so they can dismiss the Gospel and its call to new being. Instead, we are called to follow Jesus ourselves, and to live our lives confident of God's grace and faithful to God's kingdom. If we do that, we can cast our nets into the big, wide sea, and when we lift them back up...