

Wesley United Methodist Church

January 25, 2015

"Going Fishing..."

Jonah 3:1-5,10; Mark 1:14-20;

An old-timer sat on the river bank, obviously awaiting a nibble, though the fishing season had not officially opened. A uniformed officer stood behind him quietly for several minutes. "You the game warden?" the old-timer inquired. "Yup." Unruffled, the old man began to move the fishing pole from side to side. Finally, he lifted the line out of the water. Pointing to a minnow wriggling on the end of the line, he said, "Just teaching him how to swim."

Two ardent fishermen met on their vacation and began swapping stories about the different places they had fished, the kind of tackle used, the best bait, and finally about some of the fish they caught. One of them told of a vicious battle he once had with a 300-pound salmon. The other man listened attentively. He frankly admitted he had never caught anything quite that big. However, he told about the time his hook snagged a lantern from the depths of a lake. The lantern carried a tag proving it was lost back in 1912. But the strangest thing of all was the fact that it was a waterproof lantern and the light was still on.

For a long time the first man said nothing. Then he took one deep breath. "I'll tell you what I'll do," he said slowly. "I'll take 200 pounds of my fish, if you'll put out the light in your lantern."

Fish stories. Gotta love 'em. What brings them to mind this morning are these lectionary texts; the Gospel story with Jesus' call to four fishermen who he says he will make into "fishers of people," and the Old Testament text from the mother of all fish stories, Jonah.

I would like to share a few thoughts about the texts and then move on to consider this "fishers of people" phrase and what that might mean for us today.

A few notes on the texts, first, the players: Simon, Andrew, James and John--names with which the world has become familiar over 2000 years of Christian history--but, in their own day, just average folks. It was Abraham Lincoln who said, "God must love the common people - he made so many of them." And the selection of these first disciples is just one more affirmation that God uses common people - just like you and me - to get the work of the kingdom done. A bit scary for us, perhaps, because we are talking BIG responsibility here. But more on that in a bit.

Where were these folks when Jesus called them? Church? Synagogue? Some spiritual retreat? No! they were at work - catching fish, mending nets. Going about their normal routine. Jesus is not limited to church; he can and often does meet us in the midst of our everyday lives.

What did Jesus call them to do? "Follow me." Not worship me -- FOLLOW me. Tag along. "Hang" with me. No doubt these men had encountered this fascinating preacher before. No doubt they had stood in the crowd and listened; no doubt they had stayed to talk long after the crowd had drifted away. No doubt they already had felt the magic of his presence. Perhaps there is a lesson here in how folks become disciples. Just being around Jesus. Picking up on the things that Jesus thinks is important. Seeing what Jesus cares about-- and what he gets upset about. Learning what his priorities are. The more time we spend with Jesus - in prayer, in Bible study, in the fellowship of the body of Christ - the better disciples we become.

One more point to note: Jesus had a task for them. I will make you Fishers of People! You have some skills already; now put them to work in the service of the kingdom. And this is the primary task of Christian disciples - cast the nets, bait the hooks, reach OUTSIDE of the boat. I wish I could say that the church through the centuries has taken that task seriously, but we know better. For what it's worth, the story of Jonah offers some perverse comfort in the realization that reluctant witness is nothing new. Perhaps we would do better if we analyzed the problem and then found some ways to do a better job.

Now, most of you are aware that I know a lot more about many more things than fishing, but even one who has spent little time with a rod & reel can see a few basics. For example, you cannot catch any fish if there are none to be caught. Makes sense. And that is the excuse many folks use for not being "fishers of people." They say they don't know anyone who is not already caught, already a part of Christ's church. Want to know the facts? Actually, about half of the folks you know are effectively un-churched. They may have their name on a

church roll somewhere, but they have not been to church for at least six months for anything other than a wedding, a funeral, or a Christmas or Easter service. (We have some on our own roll). I guess the analogy might be that these are fish who have jumped out of the boat and need to be "caught" again. The good news is that there are plenty out there. No need to worry that there are no fish in the sea.

Another basic: it helps to know when the fish are biting. Some TV weathercasters even give the best times of the day for anglers to be out on the water. How about the "fish" that Jesus sends us after? One of the best opportunities is at a moment of transition. Perhaps a birth or a death, new home, new job, NO job.

Rev. Jesse Schwoebell, a pastor friend of ours and a fisherman, told so long ago to be ever watchful and sensitive to change. He watched the currents in the water, sniffed the air for moisture, was aware in changes in the weather as lows and highs invade the atmosphere, he watched the terrain under the boat looking for habitat that contain the fish. He knew that changed. So when circumstances changed he was going deeper in the water or closer to the shore, he switched lures; he always knew what to do and he was successful. Good lesson for "fishers of people" as well. Be sensitive to the changes in people's lives that might make them hungry for a word of good news.

Speaking of hunger, that brings to mind another basic: bait. You have to have something to attract the fish. It might be a flashy lure or some mouthwatering worm (gag), but to expect the fish to just jump in the boat for no reason will not work. Successful "fishers of people" will offer something to attract. For example, an invitation to "Come to church with me sometime" will rarely work. It is too easy to say "Sure" to that and never give it another thought. Instead, invite your friend to something particular: a special event or a distinctive worship service such as Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, Mothers Day. Be creative, but be specific. That way someone must actually make a decision, rather than put you off with a meaningless "Sure." Be the person with the two umbrellas.

By the way, there is a bit of advice for those of you reluctant people-fishers who are afraid you might be using the wrong bait; in other words, saying the wrong thing. Worry not! Remember Jonah! There was nothing attractive about his message to Ninevah, but look what happened. The whole city was converted. My point is that God can bait the hook and cast the net. Reach out in the name of the One who called those first fishermen on the shores of Galilee.

One final bit of fishing advice. Be patient. No one can be successful at fishing without perseverance. If you give up after a few minutes, a few casts, without any bites or nibbles, you will never catch any fish. 'Tis the same in fishing for people: you have to keep on casting, keep on extending the invitation, sometimes adjusting the bait. Give your efforts time to make an impact, then let the Holy Spirit do the rest.

"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people," says Jesus. And Paul Harvey once said, "Too many Christians are no longer fishers of people, but keepers of the aquarium." "Follow me," says Jesus. Tag along. "Hang" with me. A simple straight forward invitation which we can echo. And when we do, it makes all the difference in the world.

One day long ago, Jesus said to some friends, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." They dropped what they were doing and came along. Now Jesus says to us, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of people." Our response? How about, "OK, Lord. Let's do it. We're going fishing."