

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Third Sunday After Epiphany,
January 22, 2017

What Do You Fish For?

Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
January 22, 2017

Mark 4:12-23

Several months ago I was talking with 3-year old Hunter Ray about Jonah being swallowed by a fish, and I asked her if her father Daniel liked to fish. Her answer was “uh huh.” Daniel nodded in agreement. Yes, Daniel likes to fish as do many people.

I grew up on the Atlantic Ocean and, at that time, I loved going fishing. My brother and I would frequently go to Joe’s Bait Shop on the Middle River in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida to fish or would sit with our fishing rods on the opposite side of the river on the sea wall. Joe liked it when we would come to the bait shop to fish because we often helped him by scraping barnacles off of his rental boats.

At that location, the Middle River was brackish, fresh water at low tide and salt water at high tide. Barnacles attach to boats only in salt water and, since many people who rented boats took them down river to the ocean and often used the boats on the river during high tide, the boats inevitably would accumulate barnacles.

That was a problem for Joe, but my brother and I loved scraping the barnacles off and fishing from Joe’s dock. We could catch several species of fresh water fish at one time of day and salt water fish at other times of day. The tidal flow kept the river stirred up exposing food and the fishing was always successful --- mullet, red snapper, grouper, tarpon, kingfish, and more. We would even catch sting rays, and toss them back of course.

There was never a time when you couldn’t easily catch fish, so much so that our mother would often send us in mid-afternoon to “catch something for dinner.” We would bring fish home still swimming in a bucket of water, clean them, and cook them immediately. There is nothing like fish that is as fresh as that. I don’t even like to eat fish here because they are not fresh enough for my taste. One hour max from the water to the table is fresh --- anything else is not.

Here in this part of North Carolina, I don’t fish. I find it very boring. Sitting a long time on a bank or in a boat hoping to catch something is not my idea of fun.

In a way that is what life was like for the disciples. The Sea of Galilee is actually a fresh water lake, not a sea and there is no guarantee that the disciples would ever catch anything. Sometimes they did, and sometimes they didn't. That is typical of fishing in fresh water.

Simon Peter and Andrew were fishing when Jesus came along and offered them something else to fish for --- people. He figuratively took them from fresh water to salt water. James and John received the same offer and all four fishermen left their boats and nets and accepted Christ's offer to engage in a new kind of fishing. There was no guarantee that they would be any more successful at fishing for people than they were at fishing in the Sea of Galilee, but they gave it a try and followed Jesus.

Of course, they were successful beyond their wildest dreams. After the crucifixion they back-slid for a while and went back to fishing for fish, but after the resurrection they went back to fishing for people, were joined by the other disciples and eventually by Paul, and hundreds of thousands --- no, millions --- of people have since been caught in their spread nets, but they didn't do it all alone. They had help, a lot of help.

Jesus request to *"Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people"* applied not only to the apostles. But to everyone who has been caught in that broad net including you and me.

You may not know it, but, in Judaism one of the most honored things that someone could do was to become a disciple, a follower, of the local rabbi.

Our Daily Bread (November 10, 2014) said that, *"Followers sat at the rabbi's feet as he taught. They would study his words and watch how he acted and reacted to life and to others. A follower would count it the highest honor to serve his rabbi in even the most menial tasks. And because they admired the rabbi, they were determined to follow him."*

The Layman's Bible Commentary put it this way, to the apostles it was *"... no longer a question of taking fish from the lake, but of drawing [people] up out of the abyss of sin and death, catching them in the good net of God."*

Paraphrasing William Barclay (The Gospel of Mark), fishermen must have patience. They must know how to wait patiently. If they are restless, they can never be good fishermen. That is my problem. That is why I don't like fresh water fishing.

Fishermen must have perseverance. They must be willing to try and try again and not get discouraged.

They must be courageous. They “... *must be ready to risk and face the fury of the sea and of the gale.*”

They must know when the time is right --- when to cast and when not to cast.

They must use the right bait. Some fish prefer one kind of bait. Other fish go for something else.

And last, they must keep out of sight. If the fish know that they are there, if their shadow hits the water, the fish won't bite.

So it is with us. As Christians we are charged to fish for people. The same seven qualities of fishermen apply to us as well.

We must learn to wait. It is rare that we will see quick results.

We must never get discouraged if nothing seems to work. We must always be ready to try again.

We must be courageous. There is danger in telling people the truth for when we do, we take our reputation, and possibly our lives, in our own hands.

We must wait for the right time. We have to choose the right moment. There are times when people resent hearing the truth but other times when they welcome it. You need to know that there are times to speak out and times to be silent.

We must use the right bait. We must discover what approaches will work and which ones won't.

We must remain out of the picture. People should be presented with Jesus Christ, not ourselves. Jesus needs to be the focus of attention, not one of us.

“When Jesus called His disciples to follow Him, it was an invitation to be changed by Him, to become like Him, to share His passion for those who need a Savior. The high honor of being His follower should show in our lives as well. We too have been called to catch the attention of the watching world as we talk, think, and act just like Jesus --- the rabbi, the teacher, of our souls.” (Our Daily Bread, November 10, 2014).

You have accepted Jesus' invitation to follow him. By doing so, you have pledged to extend that invitation to others.

Are you doing that? Will you do that? Will you be a true disciple of Christ? If you are, you will bring others to Jesus and hopefully here to Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church.

Amen.

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011