

Catching People February 7, 2010

Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

As a citizen of the land of 10,000 lakes, it's embarrassing for me to admit I don't have much experience fishing; which worried me with this Gospel story to preach.

So, I called my neighbor Mike. He is so friendly and easy to talk with; I knew he would say yes. Mike has fished the lakes of Minnesota his whole life; his grandparents lived on a lake in Northern Minnesota; and that's where he first learned to fish. Jim and I knew Mike is a fisherman because of his annual September fishing expeditions up to Canada. Jim and I look across the street and see the busy preparations; the friends who gather and equipment piling up. This group of family and friends, up to 30 people at a time, fish on a Canadian lake about three times the size of Lake Minnetonka.

Mike told me he fishes strictly catch and release. He doesn't use nets at all. For the largest fish caught, he and his fishing companions will just draw the fish up to the boat, snap a quick photo, measure the fish and release it immediately.

Since there is an amazing catch of fish in this Gospel story, I asked Mike if he'd ever had an amazing catch of fish. And he did! On a little lake over by Bethel University. He and his brother-in-law were in a duck boat, trolling, and caught 50 northern pike! Caught and released, that is.

I imagined fishing as a more ordered process, something like farming, but everything I heard from Mike gave me a much different impression. Fishing is unpredictable! It's surprising. Fishing invites adventure; a willingness to try different approaches each time. And all because of one principle: *fish are finicky*.

Mike says you just never know when the fish will bite. On last year's trip to the big lake in Canada, Mike and his brother in law decided to set out east, opposite from where the rest of the group headed. They found themselves in walleye heaven, near a small island, in just 2 ½ feet of water, using spinner baits. They quickly caught their quota in that spot.

Mike has developed his own approach. He will set up four poles with four different rigs, or presentations to see what mood the fish are in on a given day. He offers top water, spinner bait, live bait and weighted bait. Hope I said that correctly!

So, now to our Gospel story, which involves fishing, too.

Mike's experiences made me thinking in a new way about this story. About the qualities of being willing to try something different, to look elsewhere, to change things up- how these are part of following Jesus, and learning to become fishers of people.

I think we miss the upheaval of this story, and even the danger of this moment. We get so focused on the amazing catch of fish; we miss the fear of this moment. It was unreal. Look at verses 6-7. What words do you see that tell us, this was a frightening moment. (*The nets began to break, the disciples called for help, the boats began to sink, and also look at verse 10 – when Jesus speaks to Peter, he first acknowledges his fear “do not be afraid”.*)

There is literally upheaval in this moment; the boats almost sink. And Peter was afraid. He's thinking, “who is this man in my boat? Am I about to lose my life!”

Well, in a manner of speaking, yes. Peter and the other disciples were about to lose their lives; at least as they knew them. The same is true for Jesus coming into our lives. This moment shows us Jesus does not offer a tame religion. Jesus came to rock the boat! He wants to change what we are doing today and this week ahead of us. Look at this moment, when the boat is sinking, the nets breaking, because it IS what God is up to in sending his Son to us. We might well be afraid to leave behind the way we have lived for a new life of following Jesus.

Peter fell to his knees, and so did the prophet Isaiah in the presence of God. Peter and Isaiah both cried out, "Woe is Me! I am a sinful human being! How will I survive this moment before God?"

In both stories, both men "survive" because they are redeemed, sanctified and forgiven. And that experience is so powerful, that they leave everything behind. Jesus invites us to follow him, which means change, and leaving life as it was behind. In our homes, in our friendships, in our volunteering, in our schools, in our work, Jesus says in all these places, he will teach us to be fishes to catch people.

How do we catch people? (SHOW BIG FISH HOOK). We could snag 'em and drag 'em in. This big muskie hook helps us imagine this point. (*pretend to get finger caught on point*) Ow! Are we to go out and snatch people for the kingdom of God, dragging them into church? "Look – I caught a hundred pound teenager today! Almost got away before I landed her!" That can't be what Jesus had in mind.

My neighbor Mike has all kinds of rods and reels and baits to fish with. Think of the fishermen in the Bible. They had no rods or reels or hooks. They threw out fishing nets. And that's a wonderful image for us. Gives a whole new meaning to NET WORKING. We are to cast a net of God's love on the waters. And then allow the Holy Spirit to catch people's hearts.

So we become fisher moms and dads, and evangelist bakers, and Christian sales associates; you get the picture. In each of these places God calls us to be fishers; to cast the witness of our life shaped by him. It's a wide net that extends to all people.

I thought we were finished visiting when Mike hesitated for a moment, and then said, "There's something else special about our trips. We number in age from 18 to 80. Four from our group have died, and each time we've placed a small plaque on a rocky island that rises up out of the lake; it has evergreens on it, growing out from the rocks. In all the years, no visitor has disturbed any of the plaques. That's the first place we stop, as a group to remember them. We like to say, we'll all end up on the island one day." They are thinking of heaven.

And that's the goal of the work to which Jesus calls us, to help him gather all into his kingdom.

Let's close with prayer: Lord Jesus, we don't have to know how to fish, for you will make us fishers of people. Give us courage to leave behind life outside of living your purposes for us; give us faith to say, "If you says so lord, I will follow". Give us new vision and strength to share your love. Amen.