

Fishing in the Kingdom

Let me start with a confession. I am not a fisherman. Not because I am a vegetarian and don't eat them, but because I am terrible at it. Back in the day, I tried, but I have been known to go to the trout farm and catch nothing. I just don't have the patience necessary to do the job. There was one summer that I did a lot fishing. I worked on the Trail Crew at Great Smoky Mountains National Park. At the end of many work days, we would fish some of the small streams high up in the mountains. We would carry a dry fly, a Female Adam, tie it to the end of a sapling and cast away. I did catch some native trout and did enjoy many free suppers. I wasn't nearly as skilled and successful as my Cherokee partners, but I didn't go hungry.

I think fishermen are among the most hopeful people in the world. If the catch isn't very good, there is always tomorrow. Every fisherman has a story, probably many stories. Stories about the thrill of catching that big one, that big mess of fish, or the one that got away. There are people who are fishing fanatics. They are the ones with more pictures of their big catch in their wallet than of their wife, child, or family. There are the fishing friends. Some prefer solitude, but most have a cadre of fishing buddies to join them on weekends or trips. Fishermen always learn from experts, the ones who know what bait to use, how the fish behave, and the best ways to cook the catch.

Today's Gospel story starts out as a fishing story about Saint Peter and his buddies. They were fisherman by trade. Peter, Andrew, James, and John fished the Sea of Galilee. It's not actually a sea, but really a big lake, 13 miles long and 8 miles wide. It is one only a few bodies of water in Israel. There are a few rivers and the Mediterranean Sea. And then there is the Dead Sea, but there is no fishing there. There is no life in it, because of the high salt content.

Peter had his own fishing boat, probably 26.5 feet long, 7.5 feet wide, and 4.5 feet high with a round stern and a fine bow. Peter was an expert. He knew to fish at night when the fish feed. During the heat of the day, they hide safely under the rocks. He knew to stay near to the shore. The Sea of Galilee drops into the deep close to the shore, making it harder to catch any fish. They would fish by dragnet, casting nets into the lake waters, dragging, netting, harvesting, over and over all night long. At night the fish couldn't see the nets. In the morning they would sort the catch, keeping the acceptable ones, salting them, and taking them to market.

On this particular night, cast after cast resulted in nothing. Hour upon hour brought zero fish. I am not skilled, but I wonder how you can throw those big nets into fish filled waters for hours and catch nothing. Imagine how frustrated and tired Peter and his fishing friends felt, when at the early dawn Jesus approaches, gets into their boat, and proceeds to speak to the crowd that had followed him from Capernaum. If that was not enough, Jesus begins to tell them how to fish, "Put out into the deep water. Peter's responds, "Look man. We are professionals. We know better, we're not stupid. You don't go into the deep water to fish. We've been out all night. We're dead tired. We've put up with you're preaching. Now you want to teach us how to fish!" But reluctantly, he does it. Maybe just to prove his expertise as a veteran fisherman. Maybe just to show the crowd how little this landlubber could tell them about their craft.

Imagine their surprise when their two boats are so filled with a mess of fish to the point of sinking. Suddenly Peter falls to his knees. Now he addresses Jesus as Lord and commands him to leave. "Go away from me, I am a sinner." He sees that there is something more at work here than fishpertime. When they arrive back at the shore, they leave the entire rich catch behind them and follow Jesus. From now on they will fish for people, leaving behind their means of earning an income, their wives, children, family, EVERYTHING.

Jesus comes to Peter. He doesn't invite Peter to join the synagogue. Jesus comes to Peter where he lives and works. Jesus comes into Peter's reality. He comes to Peter when Peter is least presentable – tired, sweaty, frustrated with his failure. Jesus presents him with an out-of-this-world offer. "Follow me and you will be catching people." Peter and his fishing buddies follow.

When the filled nets were dragged to the shore, the fishermen spent hours sorting the contents that filled the nets. Their catch was filled with clean and unclean creatures of the sea. Some were edible. Some were not. A clean fish was required to have scales and fins to be kosher to eat. No clams, lobster, shrimp, or catfish could be consumed according to the Jewish purity codes. The

call to catch people is an interesting metaphor. It is a call to catch people for judgment. Peter knows his status, "Go away from me I am a sinful man." But Jesus doesn't discard him as useless. Instead Jesus tells Peter, "Come as you are, we can work this out. Trust me. You saw what I did with the fish. Imagine what I can do for people. Bring me your sin, your fears, your failures and imagine what we can do together! You think that catch of fish was something special! Fish is not the abundant catch I am talking about.

Jesus calls ordinary, mere fisherman. He calls them in spite of their fears and failures to accomplish God's purposes. So it is with us. Christ comes to us just as we are. He calls us as we are to accomplish God purposes. Christ calls us to grow not to what was, but to what we can become. What we can become as individuals and as a church. God has gifted each of us bountifully and differently. Together we are Body of Christ in this place. We are gifted with gifts more miraculous than the abundance of fish bursting through our nets. We are gifted with forgiveness, hope, and new life. This is a true Epiphany for us. This changes our lives. We are given a wondrous vision of abundant love and amazing grace and there plenty is left over to feed others. I can't for a minute think that the miraculous catch of fish will go to waste on the beach. People will flock from everywhere to gather God's gifts. That's how God's abundance works. That abundance is greater than we could possibly imagine. We are invited, called to share these blessings. God is at work in ways more than we possibly imagine.