***FISHING TALES***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Texts: Jonah 3:1-10 and Mark 1:14-20

 Every fisherman has a tale to tell, a story about the fish that was landed in an epic struggle or alternative facts about the big one that got away (*probably a shark that was at least thiiiiiiis big* – and gets bigger each time the story is told). If it is not a story about the fish then there is a story about the fishermen. A doctor at the Outer Banks was stitching my foot back together after I stepped on a shell in the surf and told me how nice it was to have such a clean cut to sew up; most of her patients were tourist fishermen who cut themselves while fishing on some charter boat in the morning and just sewed it up themselves with a hook and fishing line so they could keep fishing all day! (Note: old fishing line, rusty hooks, pails of bait, and fish guts are not on the recommended list of antiseptics!)

 Scripture too is full of fishing tales. The familiar story of Jonah and the whale (actually *fish* in Hebrew) is one of the first stories kids learn in Sunday School. John tells of the miraculous haul of fish from the sea when the risen Jesus urges the disciples to cast their nets on the other side of the boat, and all the Gospel writers recall Jesus feeding a crowd of 5,000 with just two fish and five loaves. Today’s readings are among those fishing tales, but like those other stories, they are not really about the fish!

 For Peter and Andrew, James and John, fishing was their work. Day after day they pushed their boats onto the waves of the sea, cast their nets into the depths, pulled fish from the waters, and hauled them back to shore; they mended their nets and boats by the sea. Boats, nets, fish, and sea – those were the constants in their lives and the marks by which they were known as respectable fishermen.

 Do you have such constants in your life? They may be tools of your trade like boats and nets: a stethoscope, computer, briefcase, or skillet. Perhaps the constant is your version of the sea: a school, hospital, home, or office where you work each day. Or perhaps there are less tangible marks by which your labors are known: a title or degree. They are the constants in your life day to day, unchanging in a constantly changing world.

 Peter, Andrew, James, and John surrendered those constants. They left everything to follow the one who said, “Follow me.” Jesus made no promises of fame and fortune. He gave them no new tools for their trade. He offered them no title. He said only, “Follow me and I will make you fishers for people.” Immediately they left their nets, boats, fish, family, and sea to follow him. They left behind all they had, all they had known, all whom they loved, to follow Jesus. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: “They must burn their boats and plunge into absolute insecurity in order to learn the demand and the gift of Christ.”

 Could you do that – drop everything and follow? I doubt that I could. I’d want some answers first. “What exactly does “follow” mean? Follow where, for how long? Am I to give up fishing? Is there any pay, any benefits, any health insurance? Do you have references?” Aren’t those the questions Peter, Andrew, James and John should have asked before making such a big career move? Yet Mark’s gospel records none of those questions. Jesus saw; Jesus called; disciples followed. That’s it! It seems rather impulsive, even irresponsible on the part of those fishermen.

 Jonah certainly had more sense! When God told him to go to the wicked city of Nineveh with a message that went something like this, “In forty days, you all gonna’ die!” Jonah was prudent enough to see that such a mission was hopeless, foolish, irresponsible and downright dangerous. So he wisely set sail in the opposite direction. How did that work out! He could not escape God’s call, and after three nights in the belly of the fish, Jonah too followed. God saw; God called; and eventually Jonah followed. Perhaps Jonah was in the minds of the fishermen when Jesus said, “Follow me” and so they did.

 If it was irresponsible for Jonah and the fishermen to follow without raising any questions, how much more irresponsible was it of God to call them in the first place! What qualifications did ***they*** have! There were no interviews, no reference checks, no criminal background investigations. God’s first word to Jonah is “go”, and when Jesus sees Peter, Andrew, James, and John the first words he speaks to them are: “Follow me!” Did God see something in them or know something about them that made an interview unnecessary and any background check superfluous? Or perhaps John Calvin is correct in suggesting that “God called ‘rough mechanics’ like Simon, Andrew, James, John (and Jonah) in order to show that none of us are called by virtue of his or her own talents or excellences.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

 Jesus says, “Follow me,” knowing that none of us is perfect or good enough, but knowing that God can work with us, in us, through us, and when necessary despite us. Jesus asks us to leave behind all our other stuff – our boats, nets, fish, and seas – in order to follow him. For some that call may be literal. Our seminaries have gifted accountants, nurses, teachers, homemakers, businessmen, and even lawyers who have been called into ministry from the shores of secular seas. But for those for whom the call to follow is not so literal, staying in safe, comfortable situations is still not an option. It may not be a career or home or tools of your trade that you are to abandon, but it is at least trust in those things as the source of your security and identity that you must give up if you are to follow Jesus. In his words, “If any would be my disciple, they must deny themselves, take up their cross daily and follow me.” To deny ourselves is to leave behind everything for a new priority: following Christ. It is trusting Jesus whole-heartedly and risking your self-made identity, reputation, and comforts to follow him and become fishers for people.

Sam McCullough was a member of my dad’s first church in Newville, PA. Sam drove a truck for the state fish hatchery; he delivered fish across Pennsylvania to stock lakes and streams. Occasionally he would stop to visit us in Slippery Rock and often had a couple of extra trout which he would put into a wash tub so that my brother and I could do a little fishing. I had great success on these fishing expeditions. I dropped my line into the tub and pulled out a fish. There was no risk, little effort, great results.

That is how many of us prefer to fish for people: no risk, little effort, a safe sea, a guaranteed success. We wait for others to approach us instead of taking the initiative. We don’t invite others to church or talk about issues of faith outside these walls. We are called to fish for people, but we prefer to have the people come to us. We wait for the Sam McCulloughs of the world to deliver a safe catch so that we can be guaranteed success. There was no such option for the disciples. They were fishers for people in rough, even hostile waters, with no assurance of success and every expectation of difficulty. Yet when Jesus called, they followed. If we are to follow Christ, then we must go where Jesus sends us. As former NBA player Charles Oakley once said: “You can’t throw a hook on the side of the road and expect to catch a fish in the grass.” You have to go where the fish are, and Jesus sends us to fish in waters that are aren’t always safe, perhaps not as dangerous as Nineveh, but then again, maybe so. Are you willing to leave the safety of your home and pew to go there in order to be his disciple?

A family friend who ran a church camp once asked Sam if he could get fish for the camp at a reduced cost. The friend was overjoyed to learn that Sam had made arrangements for a delivery free of charge. He was less enthusiastic when the delivery arrived, for the truck was full of fish that had been rejected by the hatchery. There were fish with only one fin that swam on their sides, fish with three eyes and others with only one eye. Every fish was deformed, misshapen, or discolored in some way. It made for some interesting catches for the campers that summer!

The sea of humanity upon which Jesus taught the disciples to fish for people was full of those who had been rejected by society: the crippled and diseased, those who prostituted their bodies or their souls, the poor and powerless. They were welcomed into the household of God by Jesus. It was to them that Jesus sent the disciples and to them that he sends us. We who follow him are called to cast our nets toward those who have been rejected by the world – the poor, the homeless, the immigrant, the inmate, the refugee, the opioid user, those who may never walk through these doors but are all children of God. We are called to reach out to them in love with the good news that while the world may reject them and our nation may reject them and our communities may reject them, they have not been rejected by God. In our individual lives and in our life together as the church, we are called to minister to the needs of all those who need healing, help, acceptance and love, as fishers of people, as disciples of Christ who embody and share this common call: “Follow me!” Amen

1. John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol.1, trans. William Pringle, Edinburgh Printing Co.:1845, pp.242-244 quoted by Lee Barrett in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol 1, Westminster John Knox Press: 2008, p.288 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)