Fishing with Jesus

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

January 14, 2018
For the first 250 years, Jesus’ followers had to be discreet about displaying their Christian faith in public. They were a persecuted minority in those early years, harassed for their beliefs, even martyred. If you came upon someone you thought was a fellow believer, you would make one arc of a fish outline in the sand. If the other person completed the arc, you knew that you shared a mutual bond.

The fish symbol was more widespread than the cross in the early years of the church. The cross did not come into prominence as a Christian symbol until much later. If you want to know the truth, Christians did not utilize the cross as a symbol until all those who had seen people nailed to them had died off.

The fish symbol reminds believers of our identity as Christ-followers and our mission in taking up his mission. In our story, Jesus turns a miracle catch of fish into an object lesson about catching people for his kingdom.

Our story begins by the Lake of Gennesaret. This is the only place it the New Testament where this lake is identified by its connection to an adjoining region. More often, this lake was known as the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus is teaching people along the shoreline. The crowd swells in number, pressing Jesus to the water’s edge. Jesus utilizes a boat anchored offshore to function as a makeshift pulpit. The boat belongs to a fisherman named Simon. He and two other fishing companions, identified later in the passage as James and John, are nearby, washing their nets and hanging them out to dry.
Moshe and Yuval, two brothers who fish for a living in the Sea of Galilee, made a remarkable discovery in 1986. As they walked the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, they came upon the outline of a boat in the water. A severe drought had reduced the size of the lake, thereby exposing remnants of an old boat. Archeologists came to investigate. They labored for 12 days and nights to dislodge this 27-foot boat buried deep in the sand. Radiocarbon dating determined it was a first century boat, perhaps 40AD or earlier. It is often called the Jesus Boat, since it was the type of boat used by Jesus and his disciples.

In today’s lesson, Simon and his colleagues have called it quits after a worthless night of fishing. Jesus calls out to Simon, “Put your boat into deep water and let down your nets for a catch” (5:4). Most likely, they used trammel nets, made of linen and invisible to fish during the day. Simon has his doubts about catching fish in broad daylight but does as Jesus directs him.

The fish nearly jump into the net Simon and his fishing partners have let down. There are so many fish that the net is about to break and the two boats about to go under. The irony is unmistakable. Men who fish for a living catch nothing, yet a carpenter successfully directs them as to where the fish are biting.

Simon feels unworthy in the presence of the one who exhibits mastery over the sea. “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man” (5:8).

Jesus disregards Simon’s misguided request to take leave of him. Evidently, Simon Peter’s sin does not disqualify him from taking up Jesus’ mission. Later in this same chapter,
Jesus tells the Pharisees, “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (5:32).

Jesus tells Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on, you will catch people” (5:10). The Greek word for catch literally translates, “catch alive.” Just as fishermen catch fish, so Peter will catch people for his kingdom. The large haul of fish symbolizes the people Simon Peter and his companions will catch for God’s kingdom.

Our story closes with them pulling their boats to shore, leaving everything behind and following Jesus. They leave everything, their bait and tackle and a boatload of fish, to follow Jesus.

Note to self: Jesus doesn’t recruit religious insiders to take up his mission. The priests and Pharisees express the most antipathy toward Jesus in Luke’s gospel. Rather, Jesus calls relative outsiders, people with day jobs and no religious pedigree to do his bidding.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Three applications come to mind: the first application deals with fear, the second addresses Jesus’ summons to catch people and the third concerns this matter of leaving things behind.

First, a word about fear. Jesus says to Simon Peter (5:8), “Do not be afraid.” This summons not to be afraid occurs repeatedly in the Christmas portion of Luke’s gospel. The angel Gabriel says to Zechariah when he is selected by
lottery to offer sacrifice for his people in the temple, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, your prayers have been heard” (1:13). This same angel reassures Mary when she is told of the role she will play in salvation history, “Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God” (1:30). An angel appears to shepherds keeping watch over their flocks to announce, “Do not be afraid. We bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people” (2:10).

There are two types of fear in the Bible. One kind of fear, the good kind, displays reverence and respect for God. The other kind of fear, the bad kind, is to be afraid of God. I fear God but I am not afraid of him. It sounds paradoxical, I know, but my reverence and respect for God does not equate to being afraid of him.

Fear is what keeps people from God. Some people are deathly afraid of God. In my pastoral work with people, the number of people who are afraid of God astounds me. They have the sneaking suspicion that God must be out to get them somehow. They conceive God as an authority figure, who wants to curtail their fun, maybe even send them on a mission to Siberia.

This week, I attended a funeral in Ohio for an uncle. Some people in my extended family are hesitant to ask me too much about the work I do. I suspect they are afraid of being drawn into a conversation about something they don’t know much about and it makes them uncomfortable. Fear keeps people from God.

The stereotype people have of folks in my profession is that we work as God’s enforcers. We function much like
moral policemen sent to monitor people’s behavior and clean up their language. They are not at all convinced that God desires their deepest happiness. Such a pity. If only they knew how much God loves them, they would flock to engage me in meaningful conversation.

Second, let me reflect on Jesus’ words about catching people. Jesus said to Simon, “From now on, you will catch people” (5:10). For the longest time, I was uneasy with Jesus’ call to catch people. It sounds so deceptive. People who fish utilize deception to catch their prey. Their mission is to trick fish. They bait fish with something called a lure. A lure serves to entice fish to take the bait.

The goal of commercial fishing is to catch and kill, but Jesus catches people in order to save them. His purpose is not predatory. His mission is redemptive. We do not hoodwink people into believing. We do not bait people with unrealistic promises or lure them with false hopes. In 2nd Corinthians, Paul writes, “We do not try to trick anyone or use underhanded methods. We tell the truth plainly about God” (4:2).

I could say so much about witnessing and telling other people about Jesus. Let it suffice to place before you these five practical suggestions:

Be yourself. Find a way to talk about what you believe in a manner consistent with your personality and temperament.

Be transparent. Don’t hide behind religious jargon. Identify your struggle and doubt. People need to know that you believe, despite not having it all together or having it all figured out.
Be a good listener. People will tell you what they value if you listen closely to what they say. This will help you sensitively address their personal circumstances.

Be willing to talk about your faith in God. Some of you keep faith all to yourself. Find natural ways to talk about the difference Christ has made in your life.

Be prepared. We have challenged you in this church to write your personal faith story with 100 words or less. Why a hundred words? Most Christian testimonies I hear are too long-winded and rambling. One hundred words keeps it short and on-point. If we say less, we make it possible for people to ask more. If people seem uninterested, don’t force the issue. No one wants to be pressured into believing.

Third, let’s talk about leaving things behind. This same pattern of leaving everything to follow Jesus occurs at the end of the fifth chapter of Luke. Jesus invites a tax collector named Levi (also called Matthew in the gospels) to follow him (5:27). Levi takes leave of his tax booth to follow Jesus.

When I heard Jesus’ call to follow him at age 19, I did not leave everything behind. I did not walk out on family, quit school or turn my back on friends. Yet I needed to make a clean break from things that were exerting a negative influence on me. I needed to separate from friends leading me down the wrong path. I needed to stop watching entertainment that was killing me softly. I needed to change my environment in ways that were sucking spiritual vitality out of me.

There is ample reason why Jesus talks about following him in such stark terms. He describes this new way of life to Nicodemus as being born again. He tells the rich young ruler to sell everything he has to follow him. Jesus is not
interested in our modest self-improvement plans. He insists on a total makeover. He wants to change and transform us into his very likeness.

We need to leave some things behind. We need a clean break.

How does this passage speak into your life? Where is Jesus calling you not to be afraid? Maybe fear keeps you from God. How is Jesus enlisting you to catch people for his kingdom? Where is he calling you to leave things behind?