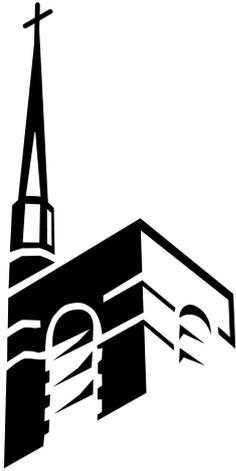


April 7, 2013



“GOIN’ FISHIN’”

Dr. John E. Harnish
First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: John 21:1-8

So what do you do on the day after or the week after?

The day or week after a wedding?

The day or week after a party?

The day or week after retirement? I guess I will find out.

What do you do on the day after some major, life-changing event? What do you do on the day after the Resurrection?

I love W.H. Auden’s poem, “For The Time Being.” It was actually written for Epiphany, the days after Christmas, but I think it could well describe the feelings of the disciples on this week after Easter:

Well, so that is that.

Once again, as in previous years, we have seen the actual Vision and failed

To do more than entertain it as an agreeable possibility.

Once again we have sent Him away,

 Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,

 The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.

But, for the time being, here we all are,

Back in the moderate Aristotelian city

Of darning and the Eight-Fifteen, where Euclid's geometry

And Newton's mechanics would account for our experience,

And the kitchen table exists because I scrub it.

To those who have seen the Vision, however dimly, however incredulously,

The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.

In the meantime

There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,

Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem

From insignificance.

The happy morning is over,

the time is noon.

For the time being, Peter said, “I’m going fishing.” And the others said, “We’ll come, too.” Back to their nets and boats, back to the daily routine, back to their work.

1. You see, fishing was their business, and fishing is our business.

Their “work” was fishing, and in addition, it was their calling. Jesus told them, “I will make you fishers of people.” Fishing was their business, and fishing is our business, too. We are called to be about the business of casting the nets for Christ, drawing others into the fellowship of Christ, fishing for people with the good news of the cross and the empty tomb.

James Collins’ books on leadership have become classics: *Good to Great* and *Built to Last*. His primary theme for any corporation or organization is “Preserve the core/Stimulate progress.” He says the core ideology, the basic values and beliefs, must be preserved even as an organization seeks to grow and change in order to fulfill its mission. He writes:

If an organization is to meet the challenges of a changing world, it must be prepared to change everything about itself except its basic beliefs. The only sacred cow in an organization should be its basic philosophy of doing business.

(J. Collins, *Built to Last*, page 81)

Around here we know what our business is. We are here to “***Gather, Nurture and Equip disciples of Christ for ministry and mission.***” We are in the fishing business, and regardless of changes in style or programs or ministries or even ministers, that core purpose should remain.

In 1975, my first appointment in this conference was Washington, MI, in Macomb County. One of my mentors was Stan Bailey, at the time the pastor of the church in Mt. Clemens. I will always give thanks for Stan and Ann and their friendship and encouragement in those early days of my ministry. One time Stan told the story of a visit to a heavy duty grease factory. He says the visitors were ushered into a large room where the tour guide gave them a detailed history of the place, their founder, the proud and illustrious story of 37 years of business, employing over 500 people, producing the best machine lubricants in the world.

The guide told them that because of the noise in the factory, he would not be able to talk to them during the tour, so they should save their questions for the end. It was indeed noisy, with lots of machinery, wheels whirling, pumps pumping, incredible energy going into the production of this world class, heavy duty grease.

When they came back to the lobby, the tour guide asked if they had any questions. One of the visitors said, “One of the things I didn’t see was a shipping department.” And the tour guide said, “Well, we don’t have a shipping department. You see, it takes all the grease we produce to lubricate the equipment and keep the wheels turning.” Stan concluded:

Friends, our United Methodist Church is the best lubricated grease factory in all of history. What’s missing is the shipping department. The church does not exist for itself, it exists to bring others to a commitment to Jesus Christ.

(Stan Bailey, FUMC Mt. Clemens, MI, Nov. 1978)

Our business is not just about greasing the machinery and keeping the wheels turning...our business is fishing.

Our business is not just maintaining a wonderful facility, or designing beautiful worship services, or offering great fellowship for our members...our business is fishing.

Our business is not just running the largest rummage sale in the world, or having the best music program in the area, or providing exercise classes and a walking track for the community...our business is fishing.

And if all of these ministries and programs and fellowship opportunities and facilities don't enable us to "Gather, Nurture and Equip disciples for ministry and mission," we've lost sight of our purpose and our reason to exist.

Collins says, "Preserve the core"...get clear about your purpose, know what your business is. Then the second part of his equation: "Stimulate progress." Or to say it in a more biblically oriented way...

2. Our business is fishing, but maybe we need to try fishing from the other side of the boat.

To quote Collins again:

We found that companies get into trouble by confusing core ideology with specific practices. A visionary company carefully preserves and protects its core ideology, yet all specific manifestations must be open for change. It is absolutely essential to not confuse core ideology with culture, strategy, tactics, operations, policies, or other non-core practices. In fact, the *only* thing a company should not change over time is its core ideology.

(J. Collins, *Built to Last*, page 81)

The disciples knew what their work was. They were in the fishing business. They were called to fish. So they went back...back to the same old lake, same old boats, same old nets, same old techniques. And quite frankly, at this point you do have to pause and scratch your head, don't you? I mean,

- after experiencing the emotions of Good Friday and the joy of Easter morning...
- after encountering the Risen Christ in the garden, on the Emmaus Road or in the upper room...
- after living through this incredible week...

...you have to wonder how they ever thought they could go back to the same old life in the same old way as if nothing had changed.

But then, maybe we understand that all too well.

After all, as Auden says, “There are bills to be paid, machines to be kept in repair, irregular verbs to learn, and the kitchen table exists because I scrub it.” So for the time being, they go back to fishing in the same old ways and they get the same old results. Then along comes Jesus: “Say, how about this? How about casting your nets on the right side of the boat?”

The Gospel writer doesn’t record it here, but I’ve been around the church long enough to know that there must have been a moment of stunned silence right here. “The right side of the boat? You’ve got to be kidding. We’ve always fished out of the left side of the boat, never the right. This is the way it’s always been done in Galilee. I mean, in this community, fishing is all about fishing from the left side of the boat. My goodness, if you change that, if you go to fishing from the right side of the boat, who knows what will happen next? That’s a slippery slope if I’ve ever seen one. Why, we could end up with people fishing off the backside of the boat and the front of the boat, and the next thing you know we will have women on the boats, and then we’ll have to put on clothes, and well, the whole of civilization and life as we know it could go right down the tubes. Oh no, the only way to fish is from the left side of the boat.”

John doesn’t record that part of the conversation, but I am sure it happened. And if it didn’t happen then, I know it happens now.

Cast your nets on the other side of the boat? Really?
Ordain women? Or allow women to be ushers?
New hymns? As if all hymns weren’t “new” at some point.
Praise band, drums and guitars in church?
Same sex unions?
Oh, here’s one...sit in a different pew?
How about clergy couples and co-pastors?

Whoa...we’ve never done it that way before!

In John Wesley’s day, it was “field preaching.” You see, the only place for Anglican preachers to preach was in the parish church, never outside the pulpit. But John Whitefield noticed that the common, working people weren’t in church. They spent their lives working in the mines from early morning until dusk, covered with coal dust, never able to put on a clean shirt and make it to the 11:00 service. So he started going out to the coal fields at 5:00 a.m., preaching to them on their way into the mines. He called it “field preaching.” John Wesley thought it was dreadful. He called it “vile.”

But finally Whitefield persuaded him to try it, and lo and behold, it worked! People listened. Some even got converted. So Wesley wrote in his journal, “I determined to be more vile,” and he preached on the street corners, in the marketplaces, even standing on his father’s tombstone. And thousands came to hear the Word because he was willing to “cast his net on the other side.”

Jesus said, “Cast your nets on the other side of the boat.” And the Gospel writer says, “They were not able to haul it in, for the quantity of fish.”

You see, it is just amazing what can happen when you “preserve the core” and “stimulate change,” when you hold on to your core mission and risk new ways of carrying it out.

And we’ve seen it around here, haven’t we?

- A new design for student ministry, and we are touching the lives of hundreds of students every month
- A new model for contemporary worship, and we welcomed almost 400 people in Shine last week
- New mission opportunities, new avenues for service, and with each new offering, more people becoming involved in serving others
- A \$3 million renovation of the South Wing to welcome persons into the fellowship of Christ, and just look what a difference it has made
- A new staff in Children and Family Ministries with new ideas and new energy
- New small groups for young adults and caring ministries for senior citizens

And who knows what can happen with the introduction of new clergy with new ideas and a renewed vision?

Around here, we know what’s at the core. We know our business. Our business is fishing—“to gather, nurture and equip”—and we are willing to risk, willing to try, willing to stimulate change, willing to cast the net on the other side of the boat in order to expand our mission.

Fred Craddock tells the story of Frank, a man he met in Washita Creek, Oklahoma, a little town with a population of 450 and four churches—Methodist, Baptist, Nazarene, and he pastored the Christian church. Each had their fair share of the population, but none of them had been able to reach Frank. At the little downtown café, farmers would sit around and say, “Old Frank, he’ll never go to church.”

Craddock says when he met Frank, he got the standard line: “I work hard, I take care of my family, and I mind my own business. As far as I am concerned, everything else is fluff.”

That’s why everyone in town was bum-fuzzled when Frank came to church and presented himself for baptism. There were lots of rumors around town about why he did it. Seventy-seven years old, always minded his own business—some folks thought maybe he was dying, some heard he had heart problems. Some thought he was scared to meet his maker. But Craddock says Frank told him why he did it. “You know,” Frank told him, “I always said I work hard, take care of my family, and mind my own business. I said it all the time...only thing was, back then, I didn’t know what my business was. Now I do.” (Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, page 69)

Frank discovered what his business was. So have we.

So let’s go fishing.