January 4, 2015

Launch Out:
"LOVE IS LIKE A FISHERMAN'S HOOK"

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Scripture: Matthew 4:18-22

As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Prayer Song

Lord, you have come to the lakeshore looking neither for wealthy nor wise ones.
You only asked me to follow humbly.
O Lord, with your eyes you have searched me, and while smiling, have spoken my name.
Now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me; by your side I will seek other seas.

Ever heard any fish stories? My dad was a consummate fisherman and just gave up fishing last year at age 87. Our family fish stories are legendary, like the first time I ever went fishing. It was at a family church camp. I was five years old, and the first fish I ever caught in my life was a snapping turtle. There was the time in high school when my dad and I were fishing in waders at dawn in the Delaware River in New York State. Suddenly, a shad savagely attacked my lure, threw me off balance and caused my prescription glasses to fly off down the river. It's good I didn't have to drive home!

Then there was the time when our young daughter was upset because she hadn't caught any fish. So my brother-in-law snagged a walleye, surreptitiously took the hook out, reattached the fish to Talitha's hook, threw it out in the water behind her back and said, "Look, Tallie, you just caught a walleye! Reel it in!" And she did! Please, don't tell her.

Have you ever seen the movie *A River Runs Through It*? Based on a novel by Norman Maclean, it's the story of a Presbyterian minister in Colorado who is a fly fisherman and teaches his two sons to fly fish as well. The story is told through the eyes of the oldest son, Norman, who says that he and his brother Paul are left to assume that Jesus' disciples were fly fisherman because all first class fishermen are fly fishermen. He says his father taught them that "all good things,

catching trout, as well as eternal salvation, come by grace. And grace comes by art, and art does not come easy."

One of the themes of *A River Runs Through It* is that there is an art and grace to fishing as well as life. However, the flow of grace is blocked in the younger son Paul's life. He's willful, has an alcohol problem and is somewhat of a renegade. Yet, when Paul is fly fishing, we see the grace flowing in him. Paul's father taught him to fly fish Presbyterian style, moving his arm methodically between 10 and 2 in a 4-count rhythm. Although it does not come easily, eventually Paul breaks free of his father's rhythm and develops his own rhythm. In that moment, Paul, the fly fisherman, becomes an artist, experiences grace and launches out into life. By the way, Norman, who has a Methodist girlfriend, comments at one point that Methodists are simply Baptists who can read.

The simple outline of a fish was one of the earliest symbols for Christianity. It was also a logical symbol because of the many references to fish and fishing in the New Testament. In addition, the Greek word for "fish," *Ichthus*, was an acrostic, meaning that each letter of the word *Ichthus* is the first letter of the phrase, Jesus Christ of God, the Son, the Savior. Did you know that *Ichthus* is the name of our high school choir? *Ichthus* means "fish."

Because the fish symbol was simple to draw, it was often used among early Christians as a type of password during times of persecution by the Roman government. If two strangers met and were unsure whether each other was a Christian, one would draw an arc in the earth. If the other person was a Christian, he or she would complete the symbol with a reverse arc, thus forming the outline of a fish.

In our scripture for today from Matthew, Jesus is just beginning his ministry and calls the first disciples. He's walking along the Sea of Galilee and sees two brothers, Peter and Andrew, casting a net into the sea. He says, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Right after that, Jesus sees two more brothers, James and John, sitting in a boat with their father mending nets. He calls them, too, and they also leave their boat and their father to follow Jesus. It's a story rich in symbolism, but also a very simple one, with one premise. God calls you and me to follow Jesus by fishing for people, by sharing and modeling God's love with others so that they, too, can come to know the joy of God's love through Jesus Christ.

Jesus' disciples fished with nets. But today, the purists among fishermen are fly fishermen. Fly fishing demands more skill than spin casting or fishing with nets. I went many places with my dad to fish when I was growing up, but, for some reason, he never taught me to fly fish until the fall of 2001 when we went to Montana to fly fish on the Bighorn River.

I learned a few lessons about myself, my faith and about fishing for people as I spent the week learning to fly fish. **First, I learned that with fly fishing as well as with fishing for people, we start with grace.** Yes, there's skill involved in fishing, but there's also a lot of luck, which I prefer to call grace. Did you notice in our scripture that it is Jesus who approaches Peter, Andrew, James and John? Unlike in Judaism, where students seek out a rabbi rather than a rabbi seeking out students, here Jesus takes the initiative. "Jesus summons with irresistible authority, and the men respond with radical obedience."[i]

So God takes the initiative with you and me. John Wesley called it prevenient grace. The only way you and I are even capable of responding to God's call by sharing our faith with others is because of God's grace which prompts us. That doesn't mean it's easy. "All good things, catching trout, as well as eternal salvation, come by grace. And grace comes by art, and art does not come easy." Fishing for people is a work of art undergirded by grace.

Once I got the hang of fly casting, I learned a second lesson. **There are different techniques for different fishing situations, and one always has to remain flexible.** I remember how John, our fishing guide, said that each day on the river is different. The sun, clouds, wind, air temperature, water temperature, currents, water flow and angle of the sun all affect the fishing. Because of my inexperience, I was especially aware of the wind. If it was gusty, the wind would take the end of my line when I was casting and double it back on the rest of the line, creating a humongous tangle called an air hole. Wind is the worst enemy of a fly fisherman, especially an amateur. I found it worked much better when I was not casting into the wind but with the wind.

How true it is for us as well as we fish for people and invite them into a transforming relationship with Christ. Sharing our faith is not a one-size-fits-all process. Every person is different and has unique needs. When we share the love of Christ, we don't simply hand a brochure to someone and say, "Repent or be lost forever." Our goal is not to punch one more notch in our belt: one more soul saved. Rather, relational evangelism is contextual. We have to understand the needs of the people with whom we're sharing our faith, respect where they are on their spiritual journey and simply love them. Above all, we have to follow and work with the wind of the Holy Spirit, not against it.

A third lesson I learned was patience and waiting. John kept repeating over and over, "Wait at the top of your cast before you throw it out. Snap, wait, throw, stop." And you have to stop the rod at one o'clock, or else the fly, the artificial bug at the end of the line, won't go very far. And you can't snap your wrist. It's in the elbow, he said.

In those first few days of fly fishing, I was too eager and impatient. I kept forgetting to wait at the top of the cast. And I wanted to catch fish immediately. I forgot the words of author Robert Traver, who writes, "I fish because trout do not lie or cheat and cannot be bought or bribed or impressed with power, but respond only to quietude and humility and endless patience."[i] It reminds me of how God works quietly, slowly and almost imperceptibly in our lives. We cannot force the heart. Our calling is to share the good news, embody the gospel and then wait for God to work.

Granted, there is no waiting in our scripture for today. Matthew says that after Jesus calls Peter and Andrew, immediately they leave their nets and follow him. Likewise, Jesus calls James and John, and immediately they leave their boat and their father. On the other hand, the disciples of Jesus do not immediately become leaders of the early church. They've never even met Jesus before this story takes place.

They live with Jesus for three years, watching, learning and waiting. It's just like our Garrett seminary students who are with us this morning. They, too, are preparing by spending three years watching, learning and waiting. And what do the disciples do after Jesus dies? They go back to

fishing until the day of Pentecost, when the power of the Holy Spirit comes upon them. Peter, Andrew, James and John represent all of us and those to whom we share our faith. Although we may have to leave our worldview behind, we don't all have to immediately leave our professions behind in order to be faithful disciples. We use who we are in God's service. The disciples were fishermen, so Jesus taught them how to use their fishing skills to make disciples. So it is with us.

The last lesson I learned is the value of having a plan. We did two kinds of fly fishing on the Bighorn River. The easy way to fly fish is "nymphing." You're in a boat, the boat drifts, and you cast out the side of the boat with a sinker on the line and an indicator. This doesn't involve much skill as far as placement of the cast.

On the other hand, dry fly fishing is when you're in your waders in the river and are fishing on the surface of the water. The artificial fly sits on top of the water, and the fish rise to the surface to eat the fly. The challenge is that you have to aim your cast about five feet upstream of a fish rising to the surface. You have to target an individual fish, or you'll never catch anything. Then, you have to watch the fly move downstream. If the fly disappears, it means a fish has taken it. You can't rely on feel for this. You have to watch.

Church growth specialists tell us over and over to have a target audience. That's going to be very important for us at First Church as we start new ministries in Troy and Berkley. You can't just send out mass mailings to any old place. You can't start a new worship service without knowing whom you want to reach. You have to know the demographics, and you've got to have a plan. Cast toward a specific fish, then watch.

Isn't that what Jesus did? He didn't stand on a soapbox on a street corner of Jerusalem and preach to whoever passed by. No, he was specific. He targeted Peter and Andrew and James and John. At the same time, Jesus offered the gospel to all people. He never withheld the invitation from anyone. He preached to the rich and the poor, the oppressors and the oppressed, the Jewish leaders and the common folk. The key is that Jesus was never manipulative. Faith-sharing that is real does not pressure people. No one can be coerced into the kingdom. Yes, it's important to target people, but our doors need to remain open to everyone.

It all comes back to grace, doesn't it? "All good things, catching trout, as well as eternal salvation, come by grace. And grace comes by art, and art does not come easy." Friends, God calls you and me as disciples of Jesus Christ to fish for people, to help them launch out into a life of faith, just as God called Peter, Andrew, James and John. But just as we don't become disciples except by God's grace, so we don't make disciples except by God's grace.

In your fishing expeditions this year, as you follow God's call, are you willing to let go of your own dogmatism so that you do not stifle the work of art and block the flow of grace in another's life? Will you allow others to experience the life-giving, transforming, unconditional grace of Jesus even if they don't respond exactly as you want them to respond? Will you encourage others to develop their own unique rhythm in their spiritual life? Are you willing to simply model and share the love and let God's grace take it from there?

The greatest fish story ever? Seven hundred years ago the German theologian and mystic Meister Eckhart expressed it this way, "God lies in wait for us with nothing so much as love, and love is like a fisherman's hook. Whatever the fisherman does, and whoever is caught by this hook, love does it, and love alone."

Prayer Song:

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1. Douglas R.A. Hare, *Interpretation; Matthew*, Louisville, Kentucky, John Knox Press, 1993, p. 30.

2. Robert Traver, *Anatomy of a Fisherman*, New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964. p. 10.