

Read Passage: Mark 1:14-20

Let us pray: O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our risen redeemer. Amen.

The old-timer sat on the river bank, obviously waiting for a nibble, even though the fishing season had not officially opened. A uniformed officer stood behind him quietly for several minutes. "You the game warden?" the old-timer inquired.

"Yup."

Unruffled, the old man began to move the fishing pole from side to side. Finally, he lifted the line out of the water. Pointing to a minnow wriggling on the end of the line, he said, "Just teaching him how to swim."(1)

Mark Twain once spent a pleasant three weeks in the Maine woods but was now on his way home. As he was making himself comfortable in the train on the way back to New York, a sour-faced New Englander sat down next to him, and the two struck up a conversation. "Been to the woods, have ye?" asked the stranger.

"I have indeed," replied Twain. "And let me tell you something. It may be closed season for fishing up here in Maine, but I have a couple of hundred pounds of the finest rock bass you ever saw iced down in the baggage car. By the way, who are you, sir?"

"I'm the state game warden. Who are you?" was the reply.

Said Twain, "Pleased to meet you. Who am I? Only the biggest liar in these United States."

Two ardent fishermen met on their vacation and began swapping stories about the different places they had fished, the kind of tackle they had used, the best bait, and finally about some of the fish they had caught. One of them told of a vicious battle he once had with a 300-pound salmon. The other man listened attentively. He frankly admitted he had never caught anything quite that big. However, he told about the time his hook snagged a lantern from the depths of a lake. The lantern carried a tag proving it was lost back in 1912. But the strangest thing of all was the fact that it was a waterproof lantern and the light was still lit.

For a long time the first man said nothing.

Then he took one long deep breath. "I'll tell you what I'll do," he said slowly. "I'll take 200 pounds off my fish, if you'll put out the light in your lantern."

You gotta love fish stories. What brings them to mind this morning is our sermon text with Jesus' call to four fishermen who he says he will make into "fishers of people."

A few notes on the text. First, the players. Simon, Andrew, James, and John . We have become familiar with them over 2 millenia of Christian history - but, in their own day, they were just average folks, like you and me. The selection of these first disciples is just one more affirmation that God works through common people - just like you and me - to get the work of the kingdom done.

And where were these folks when Jesus called them? At Church? Synagogue? Some spiritual retreat? No. They were at work - catching fish, mending nets - going about their normal routine. Jesus is not limited to church; Jesus often meets us in the midst of our everyday lives.

And what did Jesus call them to do? "Follow me." Not worship me...**FOLLOW** me. Tag along. "Hang" with me. No doubt these men had encountered this fascinating preacher before. No doubt they had stood in the crowd and listened; no doubt they had stayed to talk long after the rest of the crowd had drifted away. No doubt they already had felt the magic of his presence.

There is a lesson here in how folks become disciples. They are just being around Jesus. Picking up on the things that Jesus thinks are important. Seeing what Jesus cares about...and what he gets upset about. Learning what his priorities are. The more time we spend with Jesus - prayer, Bible study, the fellowship of the body of Christ - the better disciples we become.

One more point to note: Jesus had a task for them. I will make you **FISHERS OF PEOPLE!** You have some skills already; now put them to work in the service of the Kingdom! This is the primary task of Christian disciples - cast the nets, bait the hooks, reach **OUTSIDE** of the boat. I wish I could say that the church through the centuries has taken that task seriously, but we know better.

Now, most of you are aware that I know a lot more about many things than fishing, but even one who has spent little time with a rod & reel can see a few basics.

For example, you cannot catch any fish if there are none to be caught. That makes sense doesn't it? And sometimes that is the excuse folks use for not being "fishers of people" - they say they do not know anyone who is not already "caught," already a part of Christ's church.

Want to know the facts? Actually, about half the folks you know are effectively unchurched. They may have their name on a church roll somewhere, but they have not been to church for at least six months for anything other than a wedding, a funeral or a Christmas or an Easter. I guess the analogy might be that these are fish who have jumped out of the boat and need to be "caught" again. The good news is that there are gracious plenty out there. No need to worry that there are no fish in the sea.

Another basic: it helps to know when the fish are biting. During warmer months, some TV weathercasters even give the best times of the day for anglers to be out on the water. How about the "fish" that Jesus sends us after? One of the best opportunities is at a moment of transition. Perhaps a birth or a death, new home, new job, or the loss of a job.

A pastor friend of mine once wrote:

The dedicated fishermen in my parish...are ever watchful and sensitive to change - they watch the currents in the water, sniff the air for moisture, aware of changes in weather as lows and highs invade the atmosphere, watch the terrain under the boat looking for habitat that contain the fish. And they change - when the circumstances change going deeper in the water, switching lures when light intensity in the water changes or when they are in clear water versus darker water.

That's a good lesson for "fishers of people" as well. Be sensitive to the changes in people's lives that might make them hungry for a word of good news.

Speaking of hunger, that brings to mind another basic: bait. You have to have something to attract the fish. It might be a flashy lure or some mouthwateringly scrumptious worm, but to expect the fish to just jump in the boat for no reason will not work. Successful "fishers of people" will offer something to attract.

For example, an invitation to "Come to church with me sometime" will rarely work. It is too easy to say "Sure" to that and never give it another thought. Instead, invite your friend to something particular: a distinctive worship service (Christmas or Easter, our youth services), some outstanding program. Be creative, but be specific.

That way someone must actually make a decision, rather than put you off with a meaningless "Sure."

Let yourself go - bait the hook, cast the net, reach out - in the name of the one who called those first fishermen on the shores of Galilee.

One final bit of fishing advice: be patient. No one can be successful at fishing without perseverance. If you give up after a few minutes, a few casts, without any bites or nibbles, you will never catch any fish.

It is the same in fishing for people: you have to keep on casting, keep on extending the invitation, sometimes adjusting the bait. Give your efforts time to make an impact, then let the Holy Spirit do the rest.

"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people," says Jesus.

And Paul Harvey once said, "Too many Christians are no longer fishers of [people] but keepers of the aquarium".

"Follow me," says Jesus. Tag along. "Hang" with me. A simple, straight-forward invitation which we can echo. And when we do, it makes all the difference in the world. For all the allure of fancy church buildings, and the charm of the world's greatest preacher who pastors the world's friendliest congregation, they pale in comparison to the hand of the person who reaches out to their friend, neighbor, or colleague, and says, "Come with me." Statistics are overwhelming, better than 70%, in the response people gave when asked why they joined a church - they said that someone had asked them.

The word is that there are fish out there, LOTS of them...lots more than we might suspect. How about, with the help of God, we go fishing?

We live in an exceedingly mobile society...nothing is nailed down, change is a constant. But if times of transition and change are good moments to extend our nets in the name of Jesus, what might we do? How about we go fishing?

What makes fish want to swim our way? The bait. And how do the fish get hold of the bait? They get it when we bring it to them, when we are going fishing.

But suppose we are not very good at preparing our hook, or heaven forbid, our bait is bad? No problem.

The witness of both scripture and history is that God can use some strange bait to get the fishing done. Not knowing how or being afraid of doing it incorrectly is no excuse to keep us from going fishing.

Finally, remember patience. God does not work according to our Timex, even in getting fish to respond to our efforts. Stick with the program. Do not let discouragement keep you from going fishing.

One day, long ago, Jesus said to some friends, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." They dropped what they were doing and came along. Now Jesus says to 21st century friends, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of people." Our response? How about, "OK, Lord. Let's do it. We're going fishing."

Amen.