
Jesus Wants Us to Go Fishing!

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Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him. --Luke 5:1-11

I have an exciting surprise to repeat to you today! At least, I hope it's exciting to you. I remember, when I was younger, how excited I was to hear it.

Here's the great surprise: Jesus wants us to go fishing!

Jesus wants us to go fishing! Here is the evidence for it, right here in today's gospel: After fishing all day, the early disciples are actually tired. They haven't caught much. (I have had days like that.) Some other disciples are on shore washing their nets. They are doing their chores. Jesus wants to use a boat. They let him. He teaches.

Then, rather suddenly, Jesus says "Throw your nets over the side here." The tired disciples say, "Well, we have already fished there!"

I know that feeling, too. I have been fishing all day, rather tired, and just going through the motions at the end of the day. Then, something tells me, "Cast that lure one more time -- right over there beside that stump, right where you have cast it fifteen times already today." But I did cast it one more time over there, and a large mouth bass hit that sucker like an explosion.

When Jesus made his suggestion, the disciples complained. But they were fishermen. So they did what Jesus suggested.

They threw out their net one more time. And the fish hit that sucker like an explosion.

To those of you who fish a lot, I ask this question: Do you ever really know, exactly, what you are going to catch? I don't. I know what I want to catch. But I never know exactly what will end up in the boat. I never know what will bite the hook. And, fishing with nets, I am even more uncertain.

I use a little net (like this one) in some of the tidal creeks, and I use an even larger net - a seine net¹ in the ocean itself. I have seen almost everything come back up. Whatever you can imagine lying on the ocean floor has been caught up in that net.

I've caught plenty of things I wanted; bass and trout and shrimp and sheephead and whiting. But I've also caught strange things. I've caught a sting-rays and sharks and catfish. I've caught the good and the bad - the beautiful and the ugly.

I wonder what Jesus wanted to catch when he told his companions, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Did he want to catch only the best fish? Did he want to catch only the useful fish, or the pretty fish, or the most sporting fish? Or did he want to catch everything?

I think he wanted to catch everything. That's why the disciples' net was filled to overflowing. That's why Jesus would later tell a story comparing the kingdom of heaven to a huge net cast way out into the water. That net was so huge that it would pull in everything - the good and the bad, the sheep and the goats, the wheat and the tares, the beautiful and the ugly.

That's why Jesus went out into the sea. He didn't just stand at the shore like I usually do. He went out into the deep. He traveled to places that many righteous people would not go. He went into dangerous and dis-respectable places. And he caught fish.

And he said for us to do that, too. Jesus wants us to go fishing. I believe he does not care what sort of equipment we use. Some people use a spinning rod (like this one). Some use a bait-casting rod (like this). Some use a beautifully crafted fly rod. (The people who use this rod take so much pride in their casting techniques that they do not care whether they catch anything at all!). Some use an old bamboo pole.

And some use nets. Some are cast nets, some are seine nets. Some nets are attached to shrimp boats. Some boats are small. Some are huge.

Our methods of fishing are various, but one thing is certain for all fisherfolk: We have to work. We have to cast the line. We have to throw out the net. And we have to maintain the rod, rinsing it off when we are finished, oiling the reel's gears, replacing the line. We have to fix holes in the nets, we have to wash the nets, just like the early disciples were doing that day with Jesus. All that takes work.

Some people want to accumulate fish in a strange way. Have you ever caught any fish using a beautiful aquarium? What if you took a beautiful fishbowl (like this one) out beside the lake, or beside the river, or beside the sea? What if you set up a beautiful environment in it, laid out pretty colors and enticing food, and just waited for a fish to swim along in the lake and then jump into your fishbowl?

Have you ever caught a fish like that? No way. Even if set up a great oxygen flow in it, spending lots of money for the latest equipment. Even if you put little fake figurines and decorations in it, and even if you piped in pretty music. Would fish jump into it then? No way.

The aquarium is nice, but is that how we actually catch fish? No, we have to do something! The disciples were not catching fish until they heaved the nets overboard one more time.

Jesus said, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." We are supposed to be catching people. I do not think Jesus meant we are supposed to be using trickery and deception and false pretenses. What Jesus meant was that we are supposed to be bringing people into the kingdom of God. We are meant to be helping people, teaching people. We are meant to be giving life to people, catching them up in the beautiful community we call beloved.

We can use all sorts of equipment. But we will not catch people simply by building a beautiful fishbowl and waiting for them. We have to make contacts. We have to go out into the world. We have to talk, act, invite. We must form relationships.

Some of the aquariums are important. Sure, we must maintain suitable containers that somehow show forth the kingdom of God. We must maintain churches that inspire glory and service, that point to God alone.

But people do not just jump in by themselves. And if they do happen to jump in randomly, they do not remain unless they establish relationships. Jesus wants us to relate, to take the effort to throw the nets out one more time.

"It's been all day and all night," the disciples of Jesus complained, "and we have caught nothing. But, if you say so, we will cast out our nets one more time." I remember that moment. I will cast over there by that stump one more time. That bass hit the lure with an excitement that will stay with me forever.

That's when I knew, and when I rejoiced in the knowledge: Jesus wants us to go fishing!

AMEN.

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