Casting Our Nets -- Wide!
New Song January 22, 2006

Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Mark 1:14-20

Come with me. I'll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I'll show you how to catch men and women.

Mark 1:17 The Message

To get in a good place for a sermon about fishing I got out my copy of A River Runs Though It. What a gorgeous movie! There are all kinds of Presbyterian jokes in it. The father in the story is a Presbyterian minister and a fly fisherman. He believes something like this: Jesus’ disciples were fishermen. Fishing, at least as much as going to church, is evidence that you are serious about your faith.

The movie brought back good memories. When I was about 8 or 9 our uncle took my sister and me on a wonderful fishing trip to The Lake of the Ozarks! I loved the smell of the early morning, packing bologna sandwiches before dawn, riding in the boat with the mist rising off the lake, and, of course, the thrill of a catch, though I have to admit that I never took to the whacking and gutting part all that much.

Like most people, when I hear this gospel story about fishing and fishing for people, I immediately imagine a river or a stream--- the feel of the water pushing against me as I lean into it, the sound of the reel and the fly in the air, the image of the fly floating on the water, time spent waiting, alone, to feel the tug on the line.

Imagine my surprise when I discovered that Peter, Andrew, James and John weren’t fly fishing on the Sea of Galilee. It should have been obvious. Right here in Mark, it says:

They were in their boat mending their nets...and immediately they left their nets and
followed him.

The Sea of Galilee is really a deep, wide lake. The kind of fishing that these guys were doing was a very different kind of fishing. This was net fishing. Fishermen still catch this way all around the world. On our mission trip to Dominican Republic we met a net fishermen named Tibeau. He supports his wife and nine children net fishing. Here he is demonstrating how he casts his net. This guy is small. He is only about 5’ 3” but he could probably bench press a car.

In net fishing you don’t use bait. There is no hook -- with that gruesome image of sharp point poking through flesh, just a gathering in.

With a net you can’t be all that particular. The net pulls in everything.

Another thing about net fishing is that it’s a community project. To get the best catch you need a team. There’s nothing solitary about it. Tibeau and his sons and their neighbors all work together.

If fly fishing embodies our frontier, American rugged individualism, net fishing is an example of cooperation and interdependence that characterizes most of the rest of the world.

When Jesus walks by the Sea of Galilee and invites these four guys to “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people” he’s not asking them to abandon fishing all together. He’s simply asking them to do a new and different kind of fishing.

Now here’s a question: If Jesus is calling us -- like his first disciples -- to go out and fish for people. What kind of fishermen and women is he asking us to be? Hook or net?
A few weeks ago as I was surfing through the channels, I came upon a TV preacher talking about this very thing. He was laying it on pretty thick (as TV Evangelists sometimes do.) He said:

“I want ya’ ll to get out there today and win’em for Christ. Get’em. Reel ‘em in; win ‘em for the Lord.”

And I’m thinking to myself: This kind of thing scares Presbyterians to death!

Because down deep we are afraid that is precisely what Jesus meant: that we are supposed to go out there and catch sinners, one by one – hook ‘em by the mouth if you have to, just bring ‘em to Jesus. It all depends on you. And if you don’t do it, somebody’s going to hell.

Please understand, I’ve got nothing against salvation. I’m mighty glad for mine, and for yours. That salvation is the source of our hope and our joy. My problem is with the “hook, line, and sinker” approach.

The fact is, we Christians aren’t trying to angle or hook or mutilate anybody.

Jesus called net fisherman. He’s not asking these guys or any of his disciples to manipulate anybody. The invitation he gave by the Sea of Galilee to “go and fish for people” was an announcement of Good News to draw people together, to encircle them in new life and caring. He’s inviting those first disciples, and all disciples, to create a community of people whose lives are committed to following Jesus’ ways and who live together surrounded by hope and encouragement.

Jesus called his disciples to net fish for people.

This isn’t the first fish story that appears in the Bible. Long before Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James and John, God sent a guy named Jonah to drop a net over the great city of Ninevah. After an unfortunate watery interlude Jonah finally arrived in Ninevah, told them of God’s love and God’s requirements. Much to Jonah’s surprise (and dismay) the people believed.
Jonah had a hard time with the idea that God could love the Ninevites. It was an extremely large, diverse city, the capital of Assyria, full of people who were Jonah and Israel’s enemies.

And God didn’t care. “Cast your net – over the whole city” That is what God told Jonah to do.

I read this week about the Rural Presbyterian Church of India, one of our Presbyterian Church (USA) mission partners. It ministers to the Dalit caste. You probably recall that India, which is largely Hindu and Muslim, has a rigid caste system. The Rural Presbyterian Church in India reaches out to the Untouchables, the lowest of the low - people who have been denied everything: healthcare, education, employment and business opportunities for 3,500 years.

You are not going to believe what is happening there. When these Dalits hear of Jesus Christ – that he actually loves them, and died for them - they are freed up in amazing ways. Over 10,000 people are coming to Christ every month through the Rural Presbyterian Church of India, because people are being freed by the love of Jesus Christ. And churches from Virginia to New Zealand are stepping up to share resources with these new believers.

The Rural Presbyterian Church of India is casting a wide net.

Things that seem impossible for us to accomplish alone become amazingly possible when we join forces with others who are “fishing” too. Even big audacious goals – like 10,000 new believers every month -- doesn’t seem too difficult. In fact, if it’s not a fishing BHAG (you know what that is, right -- Big Hairy Audacious Goal,) if it’s not a huge, daunting, ear-tingling vision, then it’s probably not of God.

A 19-year old friend named Nate Ballentine (Kelley’s brother) gave me this book. Rick-Ufford Chase, the Moderator of our General Assembly, gave it to him. It’s called The Long Haul. It’s the autobiography of Myles Horton, the founder of the Highlander Folk Center, founded in the 1930’s in eastern Tennessee -- it’s now called Highlander Research and Education Center – a gathering place for community organizers, people like Rosa Parks, Pete Seeger, Martin Luther King, Jr. Reinhold Niebuhr trained there.

In his autobiography Horton wrote,

Anything that one person can do alone is not worth doing... If a problem is that small, then the goal is too limited. There is a popular theory that if you give people simple
enough goals that they can reach without too much effort, they will get a sense of success and that success will build them up. I think that’s a lot of malarkey. If a goal isn’t something very [big] all that people will learn to do is tackle little problems. You can’t develop any valuable leadership if you don’t teach people that they can deal with big problems.  

As a mom, and as a pastor, I think about this a lot. We need to encourage our kids to dream big dreams, to cast their nets wide. We need to give them the skills to share the love of God with their friends and with the world, not in a “hit people over the head with the Bible” kind of way, but in a loving, wide-net embracing kind of way. Jesus Christ is the hope of the world, and the future of his church does depend on us. We’re the ones who are called to “fish for people.” But we aren’t out there alone. Everything we do, we do together.

There’s a great example of some kids who did this. It’s a true story about some college-age guys who were casting their nets in Philadelphia. They went to hear Tony Campolo, one of the greatest (in my opinion) Christian evangelists in the world. Tony is a white guy – Italian actually – but he’s managed to pick up the cadence and the feel of black preaching. He can flat out move a congregation.

One spring Saturday morning in Philly there was a special event for college kids. After about an hour of singing Tony got up to speak. He preached for another hour. By the time he finished people were shouting, standing on the pews, clapping. It was wired.

“Okay, everybody, are you ready to go out there and tell people about Jesus?” he shouted.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

The people shouted back.

“Okay, then, get on the bus.”

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The group spilled out onto the streets and onto the busses. As they rode there was singing and clapping. The busses plunged deeper and deeper into some very scary neighborhoods of Philadelphia. Gradually the guys stopped singing and began praying, “Oh, God, what have we gotten ourselves into?”

The bus pulled up in front of one of the worst looking housing projects in Philadelphia. Tony jumped off the bus,

“All right everybody. Get out there and tell ‘em about Jesus. I’ll be back to get you at 5:00.”

These guys were scared to death! Slowly, hesitantly they walked down the sidewalk and into a huge tenement building. There was a terrible odor. Light bulbs were out, it was dark. Three of the guys walked up one flight of stairs toward a door where they heard a baby crying. They knocked.

“Who is it?”

Then the door cracked. A woman holding a naked baby opened the door a crack.

“Whadda’ you want?” she barked.

They told her they wanted to tell her about Jesus. With that she threw the door open and began cussing at them. Screaming, she cussed them all the way down the hall out the door and onto the sidewalk. The three sat shaking on the curb; a couple of them began to quietly cry.

After a long time, one of the guys broke the silence.

“I noticed that the baby didn’t have any diapers,” he said.

They could all see that there was a store across the street. They’d smelled something like bacon cooking. After considering it for a while, they went across to the store, bought a package of diapers and a pound of bacon. Then they walked back across the street, through the dark entrance, up the stairs, and holding their combined breath they knocked again.

“Who is it?” said the voice inside.
When she opened the door they slid the diapers and the bacon inside. She looked at them and at the boys.

“Come in.”

They stepped into the dingy apartment. They stayed all afternoon, talking and playing with the baby. They cooked and ate the bacon, even though two of them were vegetarians.

Those boys, who are men now, laugh when they look back at that day. They went out to catch fish for Jesus and ended up getting caught themselves.  

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