

"Gone Fishing"

Psalm 62:5-12; Mark 1:14-20

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

April 17, 2016 – 4th Sunday of Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

My nephew, who lives in North Carolina, truly enjoys fishing in the Western part of that state. Now that his father has retired, he's got an active partner to share the fun. They take along the dogs and make it a weekend adventure.

Anthropologists tell us that fishing is one of the oldest activities known to humanity. Our earliest ancestors primarily fished and hunted to obtain food. Only later did they become agrarian and begin to raise most of what was needed.

Today most people fish primarily for fun, not for food. We may say we're absolutely serious about bringing home supper, but usually it's just the pastime which draws us to fishing.

There's real enjoyment sitting on the bank of a stream, or in a boat on a sunny day, that is very pleasing to the soul. The slow pace of fishing appeals to us after all the "hurry-up" living we do. And we can always justify the time spent by anticipating all the fish we're going to catch. So what might appear to others as simply having a good time, is really work.

Aside from food and enjoyment, I think fishing also provides some insight into human character. Herbert Hoover once said that the surest way to get to know someone | is to go fishing. If a person has any negative traits they're sure to surface on a fishing trip; on the other hand, a person's good qualities will be evident.

Maybe this is what Jesus thought, too, when he chose his first disciples. Peter and Andrew were fishing one day as Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee. We can imagine Jesus watching them for a while. Perhaps he noted something about their character from the way they conducted their work. Maybe he had observed them before. Whatever it was that drew him to them, he invited the two brothers to join in his mission. "Follow me," he said, "and I will make you fishers of persons."

Down the shore a way Jesus watched another set of fishing brothers and gave them the same invitation. Upon hearing his words James and John put aside their nets and, likewise, became fishers of men and women. Evidently Jesus saw something basic and solid in these four fishermen. He knew that these qualities could be well used for service in God's Kingdom.

You could say Christianity was first organized that day on the shore of Galilee. The first four disciples were simple, hard-working folk but with a strength of character as well as body. Of the twelve, these first four were probably the disciples who were closest to Jesus during his life and ministry.

This "fishing for people," to which Jesus invited the two sets of brothers, is what the church has often called "evangelism." It simply means the sharing of Good News about the ministry and person of Christ and inviting others to discover this as well.

Back in colonial days each settlement would have a person designated as a “town crier.” This fellow's job wasn't to weep, but to announce important news to the residents whenever events warranted. Remember, this was long before daily newspapers and much before radio, TV, cell phones, and the internet.

So the crier would go down the streets of the village and, after ringing a loud bell to gain attention, he would bellow whatever it was that needed to be known. His task was to bring the news; how the people responded was really up to them. That was out of his control and beyond his responsibility.

Now this public announcer might wish that his hearers would react in certain ways. He might hope that townsfolk would want to help fight a fire in a neighbor's barn or do something else that was critically needed. Maybe he'd deliver his news in an especially compelling way | or even return later to repeat the message, but his options were limited. Criers who agonized too much over the success of their mission probably didn't last long in the job. They were judged for their attempt to reach others, not by the results that came from their efforts.

Now today we might compare this to the willingness, on our part, to make our faith known to others. We have an expectation—given us by Jesus—to proclaim his message, and we do this through our words and through our actions. How others hear it or see it and then what they do with this life-enriching News is beyond our ability to determine; still, we have something good to share and it's anticipated we will do it with enthusiasm.

Now this sounds easy but, for most of us, it isn't easy. Sometimes I think we get turned off by the whole endeavor. It conjures up images of street preachers and flyers tucked under wiper blades. It's the “Are you saved?” billboards and Billy Graham crusades. Besides, we're courteous people and don't want to offend others by intruding into private areas like religion. Often it's not easy to talk about what we believe. It's hard to put our faith into words and express it to another. If it were all that easy, we'd probably be more ready to do it.

Should our church send out one of those time and talent forms and include “evangelism” as one of the choices, I rather imagine that it would end up near the bottom of people's interests. Most people just don't know how to approach it.

I will say this, though: the aversion to evangelism can come in handy for a pastor if you have some big job that needs to be done. Now I'm going to let you in on how this works. I may get kicked out of the minister's union, but here's the way it goes.

“Say Bob, how would you like to do some door-to-door witnessing to your faith?” After you take note of the inevitable “deer-in-the headlights reaction,” then you follow up by saying, “Well, or I do need someone to paint the trim on the church and plant all new shrubs.”

Watch for the relief to spread across his face almost immediately. “Uh, sure, pastor, I guess I could do this. Yeah, I could get started right away on that outdoor work. Hey, thanks for asking me. A couple of weekends and I can get it all done. No problem!”

I find it interesting that if Jesus had wanted only theologians to carry his message into the world, he surely would not have chosen a rough bunch of fishermen. Yet, it is Peter and Andrew, James and John, who get the first call to follow him. They were surely not chosen for

their eloquence. They had no special training that would seem to commend them for the job. Jesus had every reason to look for better candidates and they to turn down the invitation, but that's not what happened.

Just as Jesus used those rather unlikely people to be his first disciples, so it seems he chooses to use us, as we are, to be his disciples today and to share the faith. When we are ready to accept the invitation to join him, he is ready to help us with the words or actions to step up to the challenge. If we seek his help, he let it be known that he will surely provide it.

Often the sticking point is that we think to ourselves, "Who am I to bring a message about faith to others? I don't even have my own life fully together." Yet, if we wait until we have **all** the answers, that day will never come. We can only bring what we have now, and that is our own, growing awareness.

You see, faith is not so much something we possess than something we're in the process of acquiring. It's less a destination, than a journey. We have to meet people where **they** are from the point of where **we** are. It's the only way we can do it.

Not long ago I had breakfast in a neighborhood restaurant. As I sat down and had my coffee, I couldn't help but notice one of the waitresses. She was such a bright presence on a gloomy day. As she went from table to table she seemed to take genuine interest in every person she served. It didn't appear to matter if they were black or white, young or old, regulars or first-timers.

At each table she seemed to give a little of herself, treating people as if they mattered. No one failed to get a smile and to the old men she gave a little wink and called them, "Honey." She asked the children to color her some pictures while they waited for their food so that she could put them up in the entryway. To a sad-looking young woman at the table next to me she said quietly, "Now I want you to go to that hospital tomorrow and be glad that there's an operation that can help you. I'm going to be prayin' for you a whole lot, but it's God who'll be doin' the liftin'. You remember that, hear?"

Discipleship is really meeting others where they are from the point of where you are. It is often expressed through simple words and by the caring manner in which you relate to people. It's engaging in simple human contact that conveys "You are important. You matter. There is hope for you now and even more around the corner. You can discover it for yourself."

You see, that's evangelism at the practical level where we live. It's simple but honest, direct but not pushy. It is something all of us can do and in our own way. When you sincerely relate to people out of your faith, you will witness to your faith.

I'll tell you, if Christ had been in the back booth of that restaurant a few days ago he surely would have noted this busy disciple of his at work. I rather think he would have smiled and turned to those nearby and said, "Now that's what I had in mind!"