

Going Fishing? No, I Mean Really Fishing!

January 22, In the Year of Our LORD, 2006

Gates Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Jonah 1:1-5, 12-17; 2:10; 3:1-5, 10 and 4:1-11

Mark 1:14-20

This past week, I thought of how often Joyful Noyz would inspire us when we sang, "I have Decided to Follow Jesus." They did not disappoint! Those words are perfect in the context of what we just read about those first disciples. They left *everything* and followed Jesus. Certainly for the brothers Simon and Andrew and subsequently for Zebedee's sons James and John, there was, "no turning back, no turning back." Indeed, the passage tells us that the latter two "*immediately* left their father Zebedee with the hired men, and followed [Jesus]." Some of us are left wondering what Zebedee thought of what to him looked like desertion on the part of his sons, but the bottom line is that they immediately answered the call.

The more I thought of the words of our hymn, the more I went in several directions of thought. As willingly and unquestioningly as the first disciples left everything to follow Jesus and as much as that mirrors the message of the first stanza of that hymn, the second stanza does *not* apply to the disciples. If those twelve heard any suggestion or hint about the significance of "The world behind me, the cross before me," it fell on deaf ears. We know how surprised – no disappointed – better yet, shocked beyond belief - the disciples were when they finally realized that going to Jerusalem did not mean Jesus sitting on a throne. They may have known they were leaving their world behind, and in the case of these four, their world of fishing in the Sea of Galilee, but the idea of a bloody cross at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry was not part of their mindset certainly not at the outset.

That the disciples didn't (and that we, in turn, don't) fully comprehend the scope of Jesus' ministry is a message for Lent. Today, we look at their immediate and unequivocal response – so that we might examine how we respond to God's call on our lives – and in the particular the call to evangelize, to, using Jesus' words, "fish for" people. However, first, I want us to take a step back and look again at the Book of Jonah. The whole "book" comprises just two pages. It is so short that people often find it difficult to find it sandwiched between Obadiah and Micah. While the lectionary calls for us to read but six selected verses from the third chapter, I added enough verses for Lynn Schramel to read today so that you would remember the whole story. The synopsis is that God told Jonah to go east to Nineveh (the capital city of the Jewish peoples' enemy). Jonah didn't like that idea and got the first boat going west to Tarshish, a city in Spain (as far from Nineveh as one could get). When the boat was beset by a storm it was finally determined Jonah was the cause. After much hand wringing, over the side he went. A big fish swallowed him. After three days, Jonah gets burped up on shore and God reminds Jonah to go east. Jonah relents and to his horror (after all, these rotten people don't deserve to be saved!) the people of Nineveh repent, God spares them, and Jonah goes and pouts under a gourd tree. When the tree shrivels and dies in the hot desert winds, Jonah complains – at which point God wonder about Jonah's priorities – concerned about a shriveled-up-gourd when 120,000 souls were at stake.

In the Jonah, the words of our hymn do not apply! Indeed when he rejected God's call to go to Nineveh, we could sing these words on Jonah's behalf: "I have decided to go to Tarshish" which is as good as singing "I have decided to reject God's call." Some will say Jonah rejected God's call because going into an inhospitable environment was not his idea of staying safe. Others contend the primary issue is that Jonah did not think the people of Nineveh worthy of God's grace. Still others think this is all about human beings struggling with their Creator as to (w)Who is going to prevail – God or humans. As we so often discover – and as Jonah discovered in the most visceral of ways, God always prevails.

The contrast of Jonah's refusal to the disciples' immediate acquiescence is startling. Now, to be sure, the disciples didn't always get the full import of their call straight – but unlike in the case of Jonah, the disciples did not hesitate when called to leave their profession of fishing for fish to become "fishers" of people. Ultimately, they became much better "fishers" of people for God than they apparently were in their former profession.

To the import of this sermon's title, a primary question remains: are we are willing to take God's calls seriously. Is "Christianity" just a hobby with which we occasionally tinker? Or does our faith *define* us in our daily living, cause us to share God's word whenever it is appropriate and timely, and is it something about which we are excited enough that we want our neighbors and friends and co-workers to experience the full impact of our faith? Any of us who have fished (for fish) know there are degrees of seriousness (and patience) to the sport. When Christ calls us to become "fishers" for people, it isn't to be a "sport" at all, but something that is supposed to define us, drive our very being, and shape us as persons in this world and prepare us for the next.

If we are to *really* go fishing for people, *really* embrace the ideas and ideals of our faith, *really* follow this Jesus, then we need to recognize that we will sometimes – perhaps more often than we would like – find ourselves struggling with some real tough issues – in some cases ones we wish would just go away – or better yet, find answers somewhere other than in the religious arena. For example, peace and justice are appropriate concerns for the church of Jesus the Christ but are issues that can "stir the pot" in a congregation. When I wondered aloud last Sunday about some of our nation's priorities, some of you felt, and later expressed, some consternation. At least I know people were listening! Even better, it gave some of us a starting point for some tough discussions of what it is that really makes us safe and grants us security – God's promises of grace, peace and love – or the assurance we hope to secure from our nation's attempt to guarantee homeland security.

Back to whether our faith is a like a Sunday morning "hobby," similar to how some of us fish recreationally. We of the Reformed faith might not be Evangelicals as spelled with a capital "E" with its implication that converting people to Christianity is the one sole purpose of the church, its "end-all," often at the expense of mission work on peoples' behalf that speaks to poor housing, underemployment, injustice, and the misery so many people experience, but to be evangelical (with a little "e") simply invites us to be faithful followers of Christ, disciples of the Word made flesh in what we say and do. To be evangelical means living in a manner and fashion that includes inviting others to be part of God's church. Evangelical means, "to proclaim the gospel." Indeed, in Germany, the word evangelische is used to distinguish those who are of the Protestant faith – those who are not Catholic. And remember, the original intent of the word protest-ant had little to do with being *against* something. Instead, pro-testament means to be in

favor of a testimony, namely the New Testament that we know in Jesus Christ, on whose behalf we are to do some real fishing for people.

Now when it comes to fishing, there are aficionados who will use a certain kind of lure or bait to catch a certain kind of fish. In Wyoming County, where Sally and I have a home on a small lake, some of the experts know how to catch either the bass that are indigenous or the trout that are purchased, already full-size, from a fish farm. The few times I am successful, I catch what others at the lake call “junk fish,” the sunnies, the perch and the blue gills. Frankly, some of the larger of those so-called “junk fish” are worth the effort of cleaning them of their many bones. They can be quite tasty. But what I find interesting – particularly in the context of today’s message - is that they are called “junk fish.”

When we go fishing, the implication being that we *do* so, ... when we, at Christ’s invitation, go “fishing for people,” we had better realize and remember that with God there are no “junk fish.” Jonah thought the people of Nineveh were junk, unworthy of God’s grace, and he (Jonah) wasn’t about to be the instrument of God’s incredible love for those people. We suspect that had God asked Jonah to go to a community down the road from Bethlehem or Jerusalem, that he would have been more willing. It was because it was Nineveh that Jonah demurred.

While we may demur if not decline the invitation to be God’s messengers for a whole different set of reasons than did Jonah, we had better recognize the opportunities we have to fish for people – and then do so in intentional and successful ways. We of Gates Presbyterian Church are pretty good when it comes to living out our faith – sharing our time and our talent with so many, giving witness to what a faithful family of people can do for each other, enjoying each other’s company and fellowship, and expressing our faith in so many different ways. But there is always more to do – and there are always more people to welcome, with whom to share the Good News, and in whose midst to demonstrate that our intentions are played out in more than what we say – but are given credence by what we do – in real, practical, loving and grace-filled ways.

Which brings us to the quote on the front of our worship bulletin. William James puts it well, does he not? Hear those words in the context of God’s call on our lives to be servants of Jesus the Christ:

No matter how full a reservoir of maxims one may possess and no matter how good one’s sentiments may be, if one has not taken advantage of every concrete opportunity to act, one’s character may retain entirely unaffected for the better. With mere good intentions, hell is proverbially paved.

Amen.