

FISHING FOR SATISFACTION

May 5, 2019 – Confirmation Sunday
The Rev. Dr. Howard Chapman
First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa
Text: John 21:1-14

SCRIPTURE

John 21:1-14

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

The Word of the Lord... Thanks be to God!

SERMON

It was indeed a great joy to welcome the confirmation class into our congregation this morning. They are five outstanding young people and it has been an absolute delight to work with them over this last year. I am very proud of each one of them. We wish them all the best and pray that this will be just one step along their journey of faith. Of course, special days like this make me nostalgic and do a little reflecting and thinking back over my years in the ministry. It was thirty-four years ago on June 1, 1985 that I began my first call as an associate pastor, at a church in suburban Rochester, NY. Some of the parents of the confirmation class were in middle school themselves at the time. But I was fresh out of seminary and I had all sorts of dreams and visions of what I wanted to accomplish. It did not take very long for reality to kick in.

I remember I had only been at it for a few weeks when a woman came into my office wanting to talk to me. Well, actually what she wanted was for me to talk to her son, Matt. He was about twenty, been out of high school for a few years and was still living at home with her. The problem was, and there is really no other way to put it, Matt was lazy. He wasn't going to college, didn't have a job, and didn't seem to be interested in getting a job. All he seemed to want to do is sleep in late, then sit around all day watching daytime TV, Andy Griffith and Gilligan's Island reruns. (Remember, those were the days before video games and internet.) So, mom wanted me to talk to Matt, to see if I could motivate him into doing something other than just sitting around the house. Now, I confess I was reluctant because I really had no idea what to say to him. But I went anyway, and we had what I thought was a good talk. Being a brand new pastor I really wanted to help him spiritually. So I told him that he should set his alarm for the next morning, and when he woke up, he should just spend some time reading the Bible, focusing on the Word of God. Then he should let what he had learned from the Bible guide him for the rest of the day. Matt promised he would do that, and so I left feeling pretty good about our chat.

Two days later his mother called and she was not too happy with me. She said Matt had gotten up fairly early the day before and left the house. But when he came home that afternoon, she discovered he had not gone job hunting. No, he had spent the entire day down at the lake, fishing. Furthermore, he told her it was my idea. What was I thinking? she wanted to know. I had better get over there and straighten Matt out.

So I went out to their house, with no idea as to what was going on. I sat down with Matt and asked him if he had used his Bible for guidance. “Absolutely!” he replied. “I got up yesterday morning, closed my eyes, opened my Bible and pointed to a verse. It was John 21:3, ‘Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’” (A verse from our text this morning.)

Matt went on, “So I closed my eyes, opened my Bible and pointed to another verse. It was Luke 10:37, ‘And Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’” So it was very clear what I was supposed to do that day.”

Well, I will admit I was a little thrown by that, but tried to salvage the situation. I said, “Matt, that is not what I meant for you to do. That is not looking to God’s Word for guidance. You were just lucky.”

“Oh no, Pastor, luck had nothing to do with it,” Matt replied. “It probably took me fifty or sixty times to hit those two verses. If I was lucky I would have found them on the first try.”

Like all fishing stories, that’s a true story. I am not saying it actually happened, mind you, but it is a true story. Our text for this morning is about Simon Peter and the other disciples going fishing. Now, today when someone says “I am going fishing” we picture a relaxing time, sitting peacefully in a boat, or beside the water, sipping on a cold one. The first thing you need to realize is that this is not what Peter is talking about when he says he is going fishing.

You have to remember all that the disciples had been through over the last few weeks. The disciples had entered Jerusalem with cries of “hosanna!” and palm branches spread before them. Then it had all fallen apart. They had been terrified, running away in sheer panic when the guards suddenly appeared in the garden of Gethsemane. The horrible side of Roman oppression had been all too graphically demonstrated as their teacher and friend had been tortured to death. Then the amazing events three days later brought excitement and hope, but also quite a bit of confusion. They were trying to sort it all out. So they had left Jerusalem, returning to their homes in Galilee. You can imagine them getting up each morning, looking at each other, shrugging and saying, “So what are we supposed to do now?”

It doesn’t take long before Peter has had enough. “I don’t know about you guys,” he says, “But I’m going fishing.” Now, this was not relaxing by the lake on a warm summer afternoon. This was Peter’s job before he met Jesus. Fishing was back breaking physical work in those days. The freshest fish brought the best price. So the common practice was to go out in the boats around midnight, fish all night, and be ready when the markets opened first thing in the morning.

This was the life Peter knew, and he decides he is going back to the familiar routine. He is no longer sure he is cut out for all this disciple stuff, but he knows about fishing. This is something he can handle. If a little hard work won’t get things back on track, Peter doesn’t know what will. So when Peter made the suggestion, the other disciples jumped at the idea. “We are going with you,” they said. They wanted to get on with life, to get back to normal. So they went with the familiar, with what they knew they could handle.

But then we have a simple but rather disheartening statement. The text says they went out in their boat, “but that night they caught nothing.” Sometimes it is extremely hard to get things back to normal. Sometimes the old routine does not offer the same sense of satisfaction. Sometimes even what you are good at is not good enough. Sometimes you work all night long and have nothing to show for your efforts.

Then, just after daybreak, Jesus appeared on the beach. They did not recognize him at first, but he calls out and says, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” Now, this is the Gospel of John and perhaps you remember me saying a few weeks ago that almost every sentence in John’s Gospel has layers and layers of meaning. This question is key to understanding this whole passage. I will get into this question in just a moment, but first notice that this is a question that is asked even though the one asking already knows the answer. Those kinds of questions, while frustrating at times, are usually very important questions.

It was just over a year ago that I had my first knee replacement surgery, but the root of my knee problems goes back around 30 years ago when I tore some cartilage. I remember very clearly when I went to see the specialist. He started moving my knee, squeezing and prodding. He kept asking, “Does this hurt?” “Does it hurt when I move it like this?” I kept answering, “No... no...” Then he paused, and as I recall he had a little smile on his face when he asked, “Does it hurt when I do this?” And I said, “Aargghh!!” I could tell that he already knew the answer to the question. I wanted to say, “Dude, if you knew that was going to hurt, why did you even ask?” You need to pay attention when a question is being asked and it is clear that the one asking already knows the answer. Here is another one... “Sir, do you know how fast you were going?” You need to pay attention when you are being asked that question. It is also important at times like this to remember you do have the right to remain silent. You do not have to say everything you are thinking. When I was once asked, “Sir, do you know how fast you were going?” I did not say it, but I remember thinking, “No, I don’t, officer. But I bet if you look at that fancy high tech radar gun of yours it will tell you.” I did not say that and that is a good thing.

There are these important questions that are asked, but the one asking knows the answer. “Children, you have no fish, have you?” Jesus knew the answer, and it would not have taken any divine power to know that. Anyone could tell by watching these men. By their body language, their attitude, it would be clear they were discouraged and frustrated. Obviously, they had not caught anything. But like I said, there are layers of meaning here, and once again, it is Bible Geek time. There is an important nuance in the original language that is not apparent in our English translations.

Now our pew Bibles have Jesus asking, “You have no fish, have you?” But the word that is translated as “fish” is not entirely accurate. The old King James Version has the question as “Have ye any meat?” The Common English Bible has it as, “Have you caught anything to eat?” This term is not literally “fish” as in a creature with scales and gills that swims in water. This term is only found in this one place in the entire New Testament and there is not an English equivalent to this term. As best I can figure out the closest literal translation would be something like, “the food that makes your bread worth eating.”

Bread was the staple food of the common people, something probably like pita bread. For most, a little bit of bread was all they had each day to live on. Bread is what sustained you, what kept you alive, and they were indeed grateful for their daily bread. But then there were other things to eat that made bread into a meal, into something enjoyable. Often it was some sort of protein, fish, of course, but meat or eggs. But there were other things, olive oil or hummus or some other kind of vegetable. These all could be food that makes your bread worth eating. That is what Jesus was asking about.

So the question is more than just about catching fish. Hey Peter, James and John, have you found what you were looking for? Have you found that which gives meaning to life? Are you just getting by, existing, or have you caught something to bring you joy and fulfillment? That is what Jesus was really asking. What is more, Jesus knew the answer to his question. No, they had not.

Jesus asks the same question today. How are you doing? Are you happy? Are you finding fulfillment and satisfaction in doing what you are good at? Is there anything in your life that makes your bread worth eating; that makes your daily routine something more than just getting by, just existing? And for many, if they are honest, they have to answer the same way the disciples did. No, we have nothing.

So what does Jesus do? Does he scold them for going fishing? Does he make them feel guilty for so quickly abandoning their call as disciples? Does he say, "You guys are such losers. I told you so."? No, he says "Cast your nets to the other side of the boat and you will find some." When they do, they can barely haul in the catch. Their nets are full to bursting.

Jesus is giving a subtle but profound lesson to Peter and the others. Jesus is asking them to decide what they really want to do. Jesus is saying, "Do you really want to go fishing, Peter? There is nothing wrong with fishing. If that is really what you want to do, I will bless your fishing. Here you go, 153 fish. But is that enough? Is that what you really want to do? Does this give you satisfaction and joy? Or are you looking for something more? If you want something more, let's sit down and have breakfast and we can talk about it." And that is what they did. Now, what can be more normal, more of a routine than breakfast? But that breakfast changed the lives of those men forever. They were transformed into powerful witnesses to the resurrection in a world that thinks death is the final word. Peter the denier, Peter the liar, becomes Peter the Rock, and through him Christ's church is established. The rest of these men gladly take the good news of the resurrection to the far corners of the world, and tradition says most were martyred for their efforts. From that time on their lives were anything but normal.

This morning the confirmation class took an important step of faith. They declared to everyone here that Jesus Christ is their Lord and Savior and that they want to be his faithful disciples. That was fantastic and we are absolutely delighted that they have taken this step. So here is what I would like to say to them; what I would like them to think about. You have your whole lives before you, but when you are an old guy like me, when you are about to retire, what do you want to have accomplished? I am not asking you what college you want to go to, or what career you hope you might have. At the end of your life, when you look back, what will give you a sense of satisfaction, a sense that you have done something worthwhile? Will it just be that you were really good at doing something, that you were a good engineer or accountant or teacher or doctor? Will you be satisfied if all you did was make a lot of money, or that you were a good responsible person, a good friend, a good husband or wife, a good mom or dad? Will that be enough? Or will it feel like your nets are empty? You have been fishing all night and you have nothing to show for your efforts.

I can tell you what has brought immense satisfaction in my life. It has not been the money I made or the things I own. It has not been my education, the books I have read, the courses I have taken, the degrees I have earned. It has not been the number of people who come to this church or the building projects or the donations that have been made. The one thing that has given me joy and a sense of satisfaction is the chance to make a difference in someone's life. It is the opportunity to make someone smile if not laugh right out loud, or to share their sorrow and help dry their tears. It is the chance to lift someone's burden, to take away some of their struggles in this world. It is to realize that someone breathed a little easier because of you, that someone knew they were not alone because you cared. There is nothing like that. It makes it all worthwhile. My net is full. And I would urge you to seek out that kind of satisfaction and fulfillment in whatever you decide to do in the years ahead. Because that is what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. That is what it means to love the Lord God with all your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself.

That is what I want to say to the confirmation class, but it applies to all of us here. Have you found something that is truly satisfying and fulfilling in your life? Or are you just living out your daily routine? Has it all been worthwhile, or do you feel like your net is empty? Our Risen Savior has prepared a meal for us. He invites us all to come, to taste and see that God is good. He offers the best that there is. He offers his very self. But here's the thing. There is a risk involved. Because if you accept his invitation; if you eat this meal of grace, mercy and love, it might just change you forever. You may find yourself leaving behind the daily routine and getting caught up in something amazing and out of your control. My prayer is for something like that to happen to everyone here. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen