

Forget Fishing, Try Following!

[Text - Matthew 4:18-23]

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When Jesus tells his fishermen-followers that they will soon be “fishing for people”, he plants a fantastic image in their minds, and also in our own. However, the various ways in which *fish* can be caught, don’t necessarily translate well as a way for drawing *people* into the Divine Realm. For example, fish can be unsuspectingly *lured* into a net, where they’re hopelessly trapped. They can be tempted by some promising morsel, only to be snagged by a sharp hook in the mouth. They can be stabbed with a spear or harpoon! And though not legal [and certainly not sporting], whole schools of fish can be stunned by an electrical current, causing them to float helplessly to the surface where they’re easily captured. And though there may be some religious zealots who would advocate using shockingly harsh tactics to capture the “godless masses” those people are “missing the [proverbial] boat”. By focusing on techniques applicable for *fishing*, some Christians completely overlook the essential part of Jesus’ call to the fishermen: “Come, *follow* me, and soon you will be fishing for people!”

Christ’s invitation isn’t about *fishing*; it’s about *following*! And as soon as those fishermen leave their boats and begin to *follow* Jesus, they immediately hear him proclaim the *Good* News of the Divine Realm! They see him bring healing to those who are sick, and wholeness to those who are hurting. By following Jesus, they - and the others who join them - learn how to be more compassionate and forgiving, open and accepting, kind and gracious. Those rough-edged [and somewhat “fishy”] individuals who gather around Jesus, quickly realize that he doesn’t need to trap or trick or tranquilize *anyone*, in order to bring them into the Divine Realm. He simply *attracts* them with his positive and powerful spirit, and his generous and genuine heart. By *following* Jesus, and by faithfully modeling his loving behavior, these disciples soon discover that they, too, have the ability to capture the interest

and imagination, the hearts and minds of all kinds of people. And before they know it, they really *are* “fishing for people!”

So...what might all this mean for you and me today? One key thing it means, is that our ability to draw people into the Body of Christ dramatically *increases*, the more you and I strive to faithfully follow the way of Christ. It means that Church growth isn't about tricks or techniques, or tackle-boxes; it's about the way in which you and I *treat* other people:

Meeting people where they are, and graciously encouraging them in their Life's journey;

Treating them with the respect and dignity befitting a loved child of God;

Showing *all* people that we really do believe God welcomes each of us, and that all of us truly are precious in the eyes of the Holy One. In other words, it's about treating people the way Jesus does - by following his lead, and by emulating his excellent example.

Another thing today's reading reminds us, is that the simplest way to welcome people into the Divine Realm, is to actually make them *feel* welcome - not tricked or trapped, hooked or hoodwinked, not scrutinized or judged - just genuinely and warmly welcomed. Again, you and I do this by *following* Jesus' tremendous example of welcoming the fishermen and tax-collectors, prostitutes and outcasts, outsiders and all those other “sinners”! Those imperfect and struggling people of this world - people just like you and me! After all, the genuine inspiration for *our* being welcoming and gracious to others, comes from the remarkable realization that you and I have been graciously welcomed ourselves.

One final thing we discover from Jesus' invitation to the fishermen, is that Jesus doesn't simply wait for people to come to Him. He doesn't distance himself from the poor or outcast, so that he can hang-out with the privileged rich or the powerful leaders of religious society. Instead, Jesus lives and moves among all kinds of people; and wherever he sees a glimmer of potential, he invites that person to follow him. For the most part, the people who Jesus calls, respond immediately. I find

this truly amazing: that everyday people, going about their everyday business, are willing to set it all aside, because of this remarkable quality that they recognize in Jesus - which attracts them and completely captivates them. It's as if there's a compelling, beautiful Light burning within him; a Light that simply can't be ignored.

In the person of Jesus Christ, the magnificent Light of Divine Compassion, Hope, and Grace shines brightly for all to see! Some see, and seek to follow. Others see - and preferring the darkness - fearfully try to extinguish that Light. Yet no matter how hard they try, they cannot succeed. Their nefarious nets of deception can't trap him; their threatening rhetoric doesn't dissuade him; even their atrocious nails of crucifixion cannot hold Jesus down. On Easter Sunday morning, the Divine Source of Love in whom Jesus fully trusts, leads him beyond the Shadow of Death, into the glorious Light of Transcendent Life! On this Sunday morning, that same Divine Source calls you and me out of the shadow, and into the Light. Inviting us all to faithfully follow the compassionate way of Jesus Christ.

Following Jesus may not improve our ability to catch fish; but our capacity to love and serve, help and heal, welcome and witness, will grow and deepen day-by-day. And that is truly Good News for us, and for all those whose lives we will touch!