

Fish, Collect, Feed, Construct....

[Text - Mark 1:14-20]

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During this past week's sermon preparation I came across a boatload of *fishing* analogies. Eventually, that wave of images about "fishing for people" made me feel a little seasick. Don't get me wrong; I've also used some of those same examples about how we - as Jesus' Fisher-Folk - might pull-in the catch-of-the-day. It's just that, over time, many of these illustrations begin to sound a bit forced. Now, I do recognize that Jesus telling those fishermen that soon they will be catching *people*, is a wonderfully constructed illustration. Yet that still doesn't mean that talking about the various ways in which *fish* can be caught, translates well when referring to welcoming *people* into the Divine Realm.

Fish can be lured into a net, where they're hopelessly trapped. They can be seductively tempted by a tasty morsel, only to be snagged by a sharp hook in the mouth. They can be stabbed with a spear, or impaled by a harpoon. And while some religious zealots might advocate using similarly harsh tactics to capture the godless masses, that's completely missing the point. Jesus also calls Matthew, a tax-collector, to follow him; yet we don't fixate on the image of collecting souls for the Savior. The disciple Simon the Canaanite was a *Jewish* zealot - likely a strong advocate for taking-up arms to violently overthrow the Romans. Yet history shows us the danger of embracing the image of Christian soldiers, marching as to war!

A person's vocation prior to his or her call to follow Jesus can certainly influence how that person understands or approaches that new calling. A carpenter might image the work of building-up the Church. A cook could focus on feeding hungry bodies and souls. And while Jesus' call to the fishermen may naturally invite Christians to hone-in on techniques for *fishing*, it's crucial that we don't get sidetracked from the essential component of that call: Jesus says, "*Follow* me, and I will make you fish 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 watch him bring healing to those who are sick, and wholeness to those who are struggling. By following Jesus, they - and the others who join them - learn how to be more compassionate and forgiving; kinder and more open-minded. All of those diverse individuals who gather around him, soon realize that Jesus doesn't need to bait or hook, lure or trap *anyone*, in order to bring them into the Divine Realm. He simply *attracts* them with his positive spirit, his generous heart, and his genuine care. By *following* Jesus, and by modeling his behavior, those disciples soon discover that - regardless of their past vocations or history - they, too, have the ability to capture the minds and hearts of all kinds of people.

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

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

Treating people with the respect and compassion befitting a beloved child of the Holy One;

Showing people that we really do believe that the Holy One welcomes each of us, and that *all* of us truly are precious in God's eyes - whether we hail from horrible conditions in Haiti, or the nicest neighborhoods of Norway.

In other words, it's about treating *everyone* 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, not scrutinized or judged - just

genuinely and warmly welcomed. Again, you and I do this by following Jesus' wonderful example of welcoming fishermen, tax-collectors, outcasts, publically labeled "sinners" - all those imperfect and struggling people of this world - people just like you and me! After all, the inspiration for *our* being gracious and welcoming to others should come from the remarkable realization that you and I have already been graciously welcomed ourselves.

One final thing we discover from Jesus' invitation to the fishermen, tax-collectors, and others on the fringes of society, is that Jesus doesn't wait for those people to come to Him. He doesn't distance himself from society's poor, so that he can hang-out with the privileged rich or religious elite. Instead, Jesus lives and moves among all kinds of people; and wherever he sees a glimmer of interest, he joyfully invites that person to follow him. And for the most part, those who Jesus calls, immediately respond! I find that truly remarkable! That individuals, going about their daily business, are willing to set it all aside, because there's this amazing, alluring quality about Jesus that completely captivates them. Not like some pathetic fish trapped in a net; but like a passionate person who has finally found that Perfect Love in his or her life.