

*January 25, 2015*

*Epiphany III, Year B*

"Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

How many of you enjoy fishing? How many of you take it seriously? How many of you do it for fun? I guess I am in the category of those who do it for fun. But I come from a family with some serious fishermen: my dad's father, Horace; my mom's brother, Andy; and my brother, Joe.

As a little boy growing up, I never got a chance to fish with Grandpa. I do remember my brother packing up to go on a fishing trip with Grandpa once and wishing I could go, too (it is tough being the little brother). My brother would take me to our neighborhood lake and teach me how to fish and be patient. I think he learned patience from taking me fishing—untangling my line, telling me to be quiet. I do remember the highlight of fishing with my brother when I was young-- catching a three pound bass along the reeds of our neighborhood lake (well, maybe it was two pounds...).

But the fishing stories I remember the most are from time spent with my Uncle Andy. My Dad and I were not very knowledgeable fishermen, but Andy was. We would get catalpa worms for bait, and gather all the tackle and then we would head to Andy's place by the lake. We would get in his fishing boat and go out for the day. I remember one day I caught a lot more fish than my uncle and dad—maybe two dozen (the number I remember tends to grow; that's part of fishing, too).

I remember how Andy would help me learn to fish. Like my brother, Andy would talk about the importance of patience. That seems to be a core part of what you need to fish. You can control some things in fishing—the right bait, good tackle, and knowing where to cast your line; but you can't always control the result. And to be a real fisherman and not just a tourist, you have to be okay with that.

Another part of serious fishing is the importance of stillness and silence. Now the importance of that might be told to little boys to get them to sit still in the boat. But there does seem to be something to gliding into a spot on a lake, drifting a bit, and then casting your line carefully. There is a rhythm you can get into without much talking but a shared companionship that can make fishing one of the true pleasures in life.

That gives you some of my limited experience of fishing. So as I read the famous passage about Jesus calling these fishermen to follow him and learn how to fish for people, my childhood memories of fishing come to mind. What do you think of when you hear this story?

The fishing way of life of Peter and Andrew and James and John would have been very different from my childhood experiences. They were commercial fishermen on a large lake. They used long nets not catalpa worms on a hook. Their fishing would determine whether they could provide for their families. That's why their willingness to drop everything and follow Jesus with his vague promise to learn to fish for people is so strange to us. Why wouldn't they just ignore him, even mock him?

Something about Jesus had connected with these men. The story we hear in Mark is likely a much abbreviated description of their evolving relationship with Jesus. In John's Gospel, their relationship is described as developing over more time and based on multiple conversations and referrals. This was not a cold call from a stranger to drop everything and follow him. They knew Jesus—and Jesus knew them. He had been fishing for them.

How did Jesus go about fishing for people? We know from reading Mark's Gospel so far, that there were two main parts to his fishing. It began with his own baptism, in which the Spirit descended on Jesus; and Jesus heard from heaven that he was beloved and pleasing to God. That experience set the tone for Jesus and how he would "fish" for others. Jesus used a simple message to fish—"Repent (change your mind) and believe the good news that God is bringing regime change based on God's love and compassion."

Something about Jesus embodied that message of God's new reign of love. We can only imagine how that came across when someone met Jesus and heard his message. We're told in Mark that people said he taught with authority and people were amazed by what he said. We're told that people were drawn to Jesus for healing from what was hurting them and limiting their lives. And these fishermen probably saw that, experienced that, too.

Jesus knew that place in their soul where he could cast his line and "hook them," so to speak. He knew these men longed for something more in their lives—a sense of acceptance and meaning and purpose that could make the demands of their everyday life more than just one thing after another. And if Jesus hooked them just right, hooked them with the promise of the love of God, he knew these men would be willing to sacrifice even their everyday lives to gain that something more. And that is what we're told they did.

Over the weeks and months of them following Jesus as described in the Gospel, these fishermen learned more about how Jesus did his fishing for people. As we read and hear the Gospel stories, we (like them) learn that Jesus' type of fishing involved being present to people in need and loving them in a way that healed them and transformed their lives. His type of

fishing challenged the “way it has always been done.” Jesus didn’t disregard religious rules; but he made them subordinate to God’s greater rule of love and compassion.

Jesus also knew the importance of those fishing rules, like the ones I learned from my brother and my uncle—the importance of patience and stillness and companionship that enjoys the process of fishing as well as the hoped for result. As powerful of a teacher and healer as Jesus was, he did not win over every person to follow him. He did not chase them down and try to throw them into the boat. Jesus respected that in fishing for people, the people can be caught only by inspiration, never by coercion, manipulation, or control. That’s important.

So for those of us who have been caught by Jesus, what does all this mean for us—for our lives and our approach to others? What is Jesus teaching us, making us into, as fellow fishers of people? If we are truly following him, we must be clear on what inspired Jesus. We must remember our baptism and what it means—that we are truly and deeply loved by Almighty God. God forgives us and is pleased with us. God wants the best for us and for all people, despite the challenges we may face in our life. And God’s love and forgiveness and good pleasure are what govern us and our relations with others.

So God’s love can help us to be patient. When a friend, a neighbor, a family member, or even a stranger that crosses our path puzzles us, frustrates us, hurts us, or even makes us angry; the love of God can help us to be patient as we fish for them. Our fishing is not to manipulate them to do what we want, but rather to try to hook them in the center of their soul so they believe that God loves them. And we know that if they change their mind and believe that good news, their lives can be transformed.

God’s love can also help us to be still in our approach to life. We can be faithful to do those things we can do; and then relax about those things we cannot control in life. God’s love can inspire a calm stillness in us so we do not fuss so much about things; instead we can be fully present in the moments of our lives and simply enjoy being with people that we love who at times challenge us as companions on life’s journey.

That is learning to fish for people. Some of us are or may become experts at “people fishing” and they can teach the rest of us how to get better at it. But all of us can learn the basics and enjoy the process. And who knows, if we really learn to fish like Jesus, we might be surprised and bring a larger catch into the boat than we would have ever imagined. Amen.