

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

January 25th, 2021, 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 62:5-8, Mark 1:14-20

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT FISHING?

These are the things I know about fishing...this won't take long:

1. When I was 5 my grandfather took me fishing, but didn't show me how to reel in the fish...as a fisherman I guess he thought it was innate and I'd know what to do. This was my first experience of "the one that got away." Granted this was with my 5-year-old perception, but that rainbow trout had to be about a foot and a half long to two feet long... no, really!

2. Second: When I was 11 my aunt and uncle bought a farm with a stocked fish pond on it. My sister was 7 and she caught one of the ducks by mistake. I caught the biggest fish of all the cousins that afternoon, and my aunt took a picture. My sister and her tiny fish are in the middle of the picture. I'm in the picture, with most of my head cut off and my right arm only shows to the elbow. This means my right hand, holding the biggest fish of the day on a line, is also not in the picture. So, there is no record of my fishing prowess...

3. Third: The summer I was 22 I was the youth pastor for two small churches on the Oregon coast. Pacific City OR has the only beach on that part of the coast where the commercial fishing fleet takes off from the beach right into the surf. There are some important things to know about dory fishing:

a. Dories are very small boats going out on the Pacific Ocean.

b. In a bad economy, which 1982 was, when a commercial fisherman finds a huge school of sea bass, and has the church's full-time minister Bruce to help him pull in the fish, they will drop anchor and fish until the boat cannot hold any more sea bass.

c. That summer there was a whale near where we anchored in the water, who liked to come up under the dory boats and rub the barnacles off his back. He had nearly capsized several boats that summer. Have I mentioned that dories are really small boats?

d. Sea bass have poison in their dorsal fins, and huge black eyes the size of half dollars. If you are on a dory boat and not fishing then you have to sit on a bench with your feet up so you won't be poisoned.

f. When the deck of the boat can't hold any more fish, they get thrown into the hold, which is under the bench you are sitting on. When there are 200 fish caught in one morning, they will fill the hold and flop against the bench that is under you as they die.

The rest will flop on the deck, covering every inch of space, and they will stare at you with their big black eyes as they gasp for air.

g. And finally, you can be violently sea sick for four hours straight on the Pacific Ocean and still live to tell about it!

4. The fourth thing I know about fishing came from living in northern Minnesota. Once I went ice fishing out on Pokegama Lake in the winter. One of the grandpas of the church took me so I could experience what it was like to sit out in the middle of the lake in an ice house, with a stove inside, looking into a small hole in the ice waiting for fish to swim by. I learned you can sit for four hours and only catch two fish. And you can sit for four hours and have a wonderful conversation!

5. The fifth thing I learned about fishing in Minnesota is that there is nothing more peaceful than sitting on an isolated lake on a foggy day, waiting for northerns, walleyes, sunnies and crappies to

bite. There is definitely a sense of anticipation as you wait for a fish to strike the bait. You just don't know when you are going to go from the inactivity of talking in hushed tones, to the race to set the hook and reel the fish in. I also learned that once everyone's caught a nice string of fish, it barely even matters that you caught the biggest northern of the day.

6. The final thing I know about fishing came in the spring of 1999 when I was on a pastor's trip in Israel. We got up early one of the mornings and went and sat on the side of the Mount of Beatitudes where Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount.

This small mountain puts you right up above the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. We were there before 7:00 a.m., and as we took turns reading the Sermon on the Mount out loud, we could see small fishing boats going out onto the Sea of Galilee.

It could have been any time in history.

We could tell they were fishing from the boats because they were using round nets which they tossed onto the sea. From our height we could see the circle of the nets as they landed on the water.

Later that morning we got to go out on the Sea of Galilee in a replica of the fishing boats from Jesus' day. In the middle of the Sea the boat stopped and one of the sailors showed us the most common ways that people of Jesus' day fished, which we'd watched modern-day people do just hours before.

The nets are a round circle about 20 feet in diameter. There were small weights sewn all around the outside of the net.

Throwing it out onto the water took skill. The entire net needed to open out when it was thrown. The captain on our boat took two tries to get it to open all the way.

When it was thrown out onto the water, the outer edges of the net sunk first, with the weighted edges moving together.

Then using the rope that encircled the entire net, the fishermen hauled it in, cinching the edges of the net together.

Before we started back to shore, to have lunch at a restaurant serving fresh fish that had been caught that morning on the Sea of Galilee, we sang "*Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore*" together there on the boat.

It sent shivers down our spines and the lumps in our throats made it hard to sing...but we could still sing the chorus with all our hearts:

*"Oh Lord, with your eyes you have searched me,
And while smiling have spoken my name,
Now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me
By Your side I will seek other seas*

Having told you the things I know about fishing, I want to tell you things I know about **Jesus' kind of fishing:**

1. First: Jesus comes to us, right in the middle of what we are doing, and right in the middle of the life we have planned and says: "Come and follow me, because I want you fish for people."

And then we have a choice, just as Peter and Andrew and James and John had a choice.

a. And I think sometimes we are asked to come fishing more than once, and in more than one way. At different ages and stages of our lives I think Jesus gives us differing invitations.

b. And I am convinced that if we say no once, or no a hundred times, Jesus will keep coming

back to us again and again, saying “Come and follow me, I want you to fish for people.”

c. Jesus is always looking for disciples who are willing to fish.

d. And you better believe that saying yes to Jesus will change us, sometimes even more than the ones for whom we are fishing.

2. Second: You will not be the only one Jesus invites to fish for people. You won't be alone. He invites your brothers and your sisters, your co-workers, neighbors, parents, children, friends, and even other members of your church family to fish with you.

a. You may not always know who is going to say yes to Jesus' invitation, but you can be assured that you will not be fishing alone, that's not Jesus' way.

b. Jesus started with 12 disciples to fish with him, and Jesus' ministry grew from there.

3. Third: There may be times that you feel like you don't know what to do...you don't know how to set the hook, how to throw the net, how to reel them in, how to fish for people in a way that is authentic to who you are and faithful to who our God is.

You will have stories of the ones that got away: the long-time member who stopped showing up, the teen who was confirmed and then disappeared from sight, the couple who seemed to be settling in and then one day they were gone.

And in the midst of a world pandemic and great political divides, and going to church virtually, you may wonder if fishing for people can even happen. But I believe maybe now more than ever people are watching what we are doing as people of faith, and that is part of fishing. Fishing isn't just about words, it's about our actions.

People who are around us, who know we are church people, are watching how people in churches who thoroughly disagree with each other politically are treating each other and speaking about each other, and speaking to each other.

People are watching how people of faith care for each other and the strangers in their midst with how we protect each other with masking or not masking, social distancing or not social distancing.

And then there is the gift of virtual worship! The gift is that this may be the least threatening time ever to invite someone to come to church with you.

They can get to know us through YouTube, before they take that challenging first step of actually walking inside our building and meeting us in person.

You can call the church office and we will be happy to add someone to the mailing list for our Sunday bulletins.

4. Fourth: There are at least two ways to react to the ones that get away.

a. The first is to remembering that fishing for someone more than once is often the only way to go. Sometimes there is an approach/avoidance to faith. Just as there is sometimes an approach/avoidance to being with a church family.

We need to remember that fishing takes patience.

b. The second reaction to the ones that get away, is to trust that no one really gets away from God. Jesus comes and invites people, over and over again, to follow him.

We may just be one in a series of people fishing.

Jesus' love is a very persistent and compassionate love.

5. Fifth: I also know that saying yes to Jesus may sometimes feel like you are in a very small boat, with the threat of underwater creatures lurking just below the surface.

a. When Jesus asks us to come and follow, the path will not always be clear, and it may take us to places we never expected to be.

1) Sometimes when I've said yes to Jesus, I've been very aware of those underwater whales that have the power to capsize my small boat of faith. Saying yes can be dangerous! But it can also give you a strange kind of courage.

It will change you in good ways.

b. You may find yourself fishing for people, and it may feel more like you are sitting on a bench surrounded by poisonous fish with big staring eyes.

I think God's quirky sense of humor often pushes us to see past the outside appearance of people, complete with their poisonous barbs, to the child of God that they really are in God's eyes.

Saying yes to Jesus' invitations will definitely change us!

6. Sixth: I know that there will be times when you are fishing that you feel the anticipation of waiting for that fish to strike, and then the excitement of 200 sea bass on the deck.

Or the excitement of someone you've invited to church coming back week after week; or the person you've shared your faith with, exploring their own faith journey, or someone coming to ask you questions about your church and why you go there; or your children start bringing a friend and soon that friend's parents are attending too.

Jesus invites us to fish for people by putting those people in front of us.

I think it is very appropriate to celebrate what happens when we fish for people, because we are doing the work Jesus is giving to us. There is joy in this kind of fishing!

7. Finally I know that fishing together connects us to Jesus and connects us to each other.

If you've ever spent time out on the lake, or wading up a stream, or sitting beside a river, or standing in the ocean surf, you know the companionship of fishing with another person.

There is something about those long hours of waiting and hoping that leave time for deep conversations.

I've gotten to know people so much faster when we've sat together in a boat, or gathered around the tables in the library or by Zoom at Elders and Deacons meetings. I've gotten to know you better as we've worked side by side at the Riverbend Food Bank or Closet2Closet, or helped lead children through a week of Bible School, or traveled to events with the Youth Group or Confirmation Class and had time to talk in the car.

These are the things I know about fishing. Jesus stands before us again this morning, just as he does each day. Today Jesus calls us, saying come and follow me, and I will make you fish for people.

Peter and Andrew and James and John show us how to respond immediately, so that we can sing the next hymn with conviction:

*"Oh Lord, with your eyes you have searched me,
and while smiling, have called out my name.
Now my boats left on the shoreline behind me,
now with you I will seek other seas."*

(see 09-01-25)