

Fishing from the Right Side of the Boat

John 21: 1-14

Introduction

Deep in their hearts, **Peter, Andrew, James, and John** always thought of themselves as professional **fishermen**. These rough-hewn men made a living with their hands and backs, hauling sodden nets from the reluctant water. They practiced the trade of their fathers and one day of their sons.

On that fateful morning in Galilee, Jesus watched the four casting their nets into the lake. Then he invited them to do what they did best: fish. Jesus said: *“Come follow me, and I will make you **fishers of men!**”* Leaving behind boats, nets, family and friends, they answered Christ’s call.

I. Gone Fishing

The three years of Jesus’ public ministry had come and gone; for the disciples, however, it felt like a lifetime. On the far side of the Cross and the Empty Tomb, they would never be the same again. They had seen the Risen Lord and heard his words of hope and promise. Now they were waiting for whatever came next.

The scene from today’s Bible lesson in **John 21** occurred sometime after Easter. No one knows exactly when; but, the disciples had enough time to travel from Jerusalem back home to Galilee. Only seven made the trip, suggesting that the three-year fellowship of the disciples was already breaking apart without Jesus’ earthly leadership.

Simon Peter decided to go **fishing**, and the other six disciples agreed to join him. Remember that fishing was a vocation and not an avocation for these men—a job and not a hobby. Maybe this was a step towards resuming their old way of life.

If they were returning to their former job, then the first attempt was a resounding failure. The seven men didn’t catch a single fish all night. Then at dawn a man on the shore asked the age-old question of fishermen everywhere: *“Have you caught anything?”* They disgustingly answered, *“No!”* So the man called back, *“Throw your net on the **right side of the boat** and you will find some.”*

OH, the **RIGHT** side of the boat! Why didn’t **THEY** think of **THAT**? These men were professional fishermen and didn’t need any amateur’s advice. Obviously this fellow didn’t know anything about fishing. There was a very good reason why they cast their nets on the left side of the boat rather than the right.

First century boats used on the Sea of Galilee did not have centerline rudders like today. Instead, they used a specialized oar called a **“steering board”** towards the back of the boat. A sailor would use a tiller to muscle the board around so that the boat headed in the desired direction. Since most people are **right-handed**, the board typically went on the right side of the boat. In fact, the nautical term **“starboard”** designating the right side of a ship comes from the Old English word “steer-board.”

These New Testament fishermen would have never fished from the right side of the boat because they might tangle the nets and lose the catch. John doesn’t record the

disciples' discussion, but I've attended enough church meetings to imagine the conversation that occurred between the seven men.

"Cast on the right side of the boat? We've never done it that way before. Well, we did try it once, but it didn't work. And what if we did change sides? Before long, people would be fishing out of the back of the boat and the front of the boat, too. Next thing you know we would have women fishing on the boat, and then we would have to fish with our clothes on! And the synagogue would have to provide childcare. We might even have some non-fishermen want to join us. Who knows what would happen next? Nope, the only right way to fish is over the left side of the boat."

II. Change in the Church

Two thousand years have passed but human nature has not changed. No one likes **innovation or change**. We are creatures of habit, always hesitant to try something new. Our routines and ruts fit like comfortable bedroom slippers.

We get "sot" in our ways. For example, believe it or not, I've heard of some church folk (in OTHER churches!) that have a particular place they like to sit every Sunday. Really!

I mentioned earlier that today's sermon is a "Summer Rerun" that I preached previously. I originally preached the sermon on the first Sunday we began the renovation of the sanctuary in 2007. All three services met in the Family Life Center. I watched people enter the Celebration Hall and attempt to sit in the same place they would if it was the sanctuary. Just for funsies, we arranged the floor into three sections rather than two! Folk were as confused as termites in a yo-yo!

One of the first churches I served was **Mount Carmel** United Methodist Church. In the old sanctuary, there was a dark stain on the left wall next to the second pew. Despite repeated coats of paint, the stain still bled through. A long-time member of the congregation explained to me that Uncle John always sat on the end of that pew. During the sermon, he would lean his head against the wall and go to sleep. The Vitalis in his hair had soaked into the wood for all eternity! Now THAT'S a true Methodist!

We find our normal seats in Sunday School class. We sit with the same people at Wednesday night suppers. We perpetuate programs and ministries because that's the way we've always done it. Our routines become ruts; and even if a rut is nothing more than a grave with two open ends, it is OUR rut, familiar and preferred.

The seven last words of a dying church are: "*We've never done it that way before.*" A variation on this theme is: "*We tried that once but it didn't work.*" So we continue to do the same old thing and then act surprised at the same old results. Doing the same thing and expecting a different outcome is one definition of insanity!

If a church—or a Sunday School class, small group, mission team, fill-in-the-blank in the local church—is not growing, then it is declining. So our natural inclination is to work even hard; but doing the same things even better will only accelerate the decline!

Hear this simple but profound truth: if you don't like your life, your marriage, your family, your church, or your community, try doing something new to change it for the better. Unless we are willing to change, we must settle for the same results.

Here's a minor illustration from my own life. I HATE to file. In the past, I would place files with sermons, Bible studies, etc. on top of the filing cabinet and say to myself, "I'll file those later." After a few months, a mountain of paperwork would accumulate, and I would spend several hours sorting and filing. After each marathon filing session, I would say to myself, "Never again!"

Then I would put a file on top of the cabinet and say to myself, "I'll file that later!" I finally got to the point where I said, "Enough is enough." I now practice a strict discipline that any folder I carry to the cabinet immediately gets filed. Because I know what will happen if I don't.

That's a rather shallow example. However, the same principle applies to areas of our lives that need to change. It requires a lifestyle change to make a transformation in life. And it requires persistence to make the change permanent.

The motto of the British Special Air Service is: "*He who dares, wins!*" We are called to dare great new things for our God. Brothers and sisters, Jesus is calling us to cast our nets over the right side of the boat for a great catch.

III. The Great Catch

After a long night of fishing with empty nets, the last thing the disciples needed was someone on the shore telling them to fish off the RIGHT side of the boat. But then one of the disciples must have said, "Why not? It couldn't get any worse." So they cast their nets back into the water on the "wrong side" of the boat.

When they hauled on the ropes, they discovered that the nets were full to the breaking. The morning had dawned with a **miraculous catch**. At this point, it becomes obvious that a MAN is writing this Gospel account. First, it is a fish story. Second, John makes sure to note there were 153 fish in total—not 152 or 154. And the topper is that he adds that they were 153 BIG fish.

I would add as an aside that it is also obvious that the author of John's Gospel had not yet become a fully ordained minister. A REAL preacher would not have counted 153 fish. Instead, s/he would make a ministerial estimate and rounded UP to 200!

THEN the disciple that Jesus loved turned to Simon Peter and said, "***It is the Lord!***" The situation suddenly became as clear as the rising sun. Simon Peter was so excited that he put ON his clothes before jumping into the water to swim to shore!

There are grace-filled moments in life when the veil of this world is lifted and we catch a glimpse of God at work. Abraham entertained strangers who were angels unawares. Moses turned aside to see a bush consumed by fire and yet not burnt. Samuel heard God's voice in the darkened Temple. Isaiah saw God sitting enthroned upon the heavens. John dropped to his knees in the Upper Room and declared, "*My Lord and my God.*" The apostle Paul was blinded on the Road to Damascus and heard the voice of the

Christ whose followers he persecuted. Imprisoned on the island of Patmos, John recorded his vision of the Last Days known as Revelation.

Each and every time these patriarchs and matriarchs, disciples and apostles, saints of God, brothers and sisters in Christ experienced a divine encounter that them to exclaim and proclaim: *“It is the Lord!”* We are blessed to be living in just such a moment in our church’s life when the miraculous is common-place and the unexpected is business-as-usual. This community of faith has been placed by God in this time and place to make a difference in the lives of men and women, boys and girls.

Since the first century Christ’s disciples have wrestled with these two questions: *“Have we fallen in love with the act of fishing over the left side of the boat regardless of the results?”* and *“Are our nets empty or full?”* If our nets are empty, then we’re not fishing—we’re simply wasting our time on techniques that no longer work. Doing the same thing even better will not put a single fish in the boat.

Church consultant, **Lyle Schaller**, wrote that it is the sinful tendency of every human institution to forget its original reason for being and to focus on maintenance and survival instead. This year we are experiencing the greatest membership growth this church has seen in years; however, it is easy as a senior minister, church staff, and congregation to rest on our laurels and think that enough is enough. We must constantly remind ourselves who we are and why we exist.

Two thousand years ago Jesus gave his disciples the Great Commission: *“Make disciples of Jesus Christ.”* The United Methodist Church’s *Book of Discipline* echoes these words when it describes the church’s reason for being. Our own Mission Statement declares that the Sam Jones church exists to *“Make disciples of Jesus Christ through worship, education, service, and fellowship.”*

The message is eternal; however, the medium by which it is proclaimed must change constantly. Expert fishermen know that if a technique or lure is not working that they must change to another. The lake and conditions are continually changing, and a successful fisherman must change with them.

I challenge you this morning to consider your life as a Christian. What are you doing to share the gospel with others? What is there about your life, actions, and speech that is so winsome in faith that others naturally want to know about your Savior? On a more prosaic level, when was the last time you invited someone to church, made a visitor feel at home, or simply sat in a different place on Sunday morning or Wednesday night?

I challenge the Sunday School classes, Bible study groups, choirs, children, youth, and adult leaders to examine your life together. Are you growing in numbers and faith? Are your nets empty or full? Are we making disciples for Jesus Christ or repeating the same rote actions over and over again with no results?

I challenge God’s church that meets at Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church. Are we in love with the act of fishing over the left side of the boat? Or do we have a burning desire to see nets full to the breaking for Jesus Christ? Are we willing to change in order to make disciples of Jesus Christ? Or would we prefer to keep our normal routines and habits.

Conclusion

In the 1700s, **John Wesley** was a priest in the Church of England. The only proper place for an Anglican minister to preach was in the pulpit of a parish church. However, the church had become irrelevant to most people in England and the pews were empty. **George Whitfield** was a friend of Wesley's and noticed that the common people spent most of their time in the coal mines, farm fields, and taverns. So Whitfield began going to where the people were and engaged in "**field preaching.**"

When Whitfield invited Wesley to join him, the high-church Anglican rejected the invitation out-of-hand. He thought it was a dreadful practice that he called "vile." Yet Whitfield continued to prod Wesley, and John finally gave in. In his journal that day, Wesley wrote: "*At four o'clock this afternoon, I submitted to be more vile.*" The Methodist movement began a revival in England that swept the nation and then the oceans and world.

Growing churches that want to reach others for Jesus Christ have a "***whatever it takes***" attitude. We will do whatever it takes to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Sometimes this might entail becoming a foreign missionary, answering God's call to the ordained ministry, or selling all you possess to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Other times it may mean coming to worship fifteen minutes earlier than normal, attending worship in a different building, sitting in a new seat, greeting a stranger, inviting a neighbor, or volunteering to serve.

If we're fishing off the left side of the boat with no results, then maybe it is time to change our tactics. There is a voice that calls to us, "*Cast your nets on the right side.*" When we answer in faith, God's saints are constantly surprised at the result. Time and gain we proclaim in amazement to one another, "*It is the Lord!*"