

Preacher: The Rev. R. Bruce Todd

“Using the Right Bait”

The theme of today's Gospel lesson is Fishing! So I can't resist telling a couple “Fish Stories.” Two guys go on a fishing trip. They spend a ton of money renting all the equipment: the reels, the rods, the wading suits, the rowboat, the car, and even a cabin in the woods. They spend a fortune. The first day they go fishing they don't catch a thing. The same thing happens on the second day, and on the third day. It goes on like this until finally, on the last day of their vacation, one of the men finally catches a fish. As they drive home, they are both really depressed. One turns to the other and says, "Do you realize that this one lousy fish we caught cost us fifteen hundred dollars?" "Wow!" says the other, "It's a good thing we didn't catch any more!"

Another one. A man was stopped by a game-warden in a State Park with two buckets of fish leaving a lake well known for its fishing. The game warden asked, "Do you have a license to catch those fish? If you don't, it'll cost you a \$500 fine." The man replied to the game warden, "No, sir. These are my pet fish." "Pet fish?" the warden replied. "Yes, sir. Every night I take these here fish down to the lake and let them swim around for a while. I whistle and they jump back into their buckets, and I take 'em home." "That's a bunch of hooey! Fish can't do that!" The man looked at the game warden for a moment, and then said, "Here, I'll show you. It really works." "OK. I've got to see this!" The game warden was curious. The man poured the fish into the river and stood and waited. After several minutes, the game warden turned to the man and said, "Well?" "Well, what?" the man responded. "When are you going to call them back?" the game warden prompted. "Call who back?" the man asked. "The fish!" "What fish?" the man asked.

Fish Stories are known to be a bit of an exaggeration. I'll bet that Fish Stories go all the way back to Biblical times. Our Gospel lesson today is a "fish story" of sorts. It starts out with Jesus being pursued by the crowd, people who have heard about this amazing young man, his healing miracles, casting out demons. They wanted to hear what he had to say? So they were “pressing in on him,” as the text says, "listening to the word of God." They were pressing in so close, that it prompted Jesus to press into service a beached fishing boat belonging to an acquaintance named Simon, whose mother-in-law Jesus had recently healed. Simon was quick to agree. He had been washing his nets, most likely tilting his head to catch the words of the Rabbi Jesus. Those words may be all he catches today, he's probably thinking to himself. After all, he and his partners had been out fishing all night and had caught nothing but an occasional nap. So Jesus climbs into the boat, Simon pushes off, and the teaching continues. We have no clue as to how long the preaching and teaching continues, but for awhile we expect. Finally, it is over.

Simon and his buddies are ready to get home for some shut-eye in preparation for another night's work. After all, night time, especially the early morning hours before dawn, is best for fishing, even if last night was not so good. But instead of doing that, Jesus says, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." "What?" Simon thinks to himself. "This is not the time to be fishing, and the fish are not biting today anyway. And besides, this rabbi might be special in SOME things, but he is a carpenter, not a fisherman. Let's go home!"

But something about this Jesus overcomes the reluctance. "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." He calls to his partners, James and John, and together they sail the two boats out from shore. Now comes the fish story. The catch is humongous. Too big for one boat, and even too big for the two boats together: so many flopping, slippery fish that the boats are in danger of going under. Simon has never seen anything like it. "Whoa! This rabbi is something!" As the gospel account has it, "he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" Jesus only smiles. "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch people." Just like that - they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Which is more the miracle here? The incredible catch of fish? Or the incredible catch of these men? They drop everything, give it all up - their business, their home, their way of life, and, if tradition is correct, their very lives themselves, all to follow Jesus. To "catch people." And down through two millennia of Christian history, that is how every generation of followers of Jesus have understood our calling - to catch people. The word for that is "evangelism," a word that makes good Lutherans turn pale and start fanning themselves. Evangelism - going out and telling others about the saving Grace of Jesus Christ. Too many Christians are no longer fishers of men - but simply keepers of the aquarium."

There are several ways to interpret this story about, "catching people." We could think of ourselves as the ones casting the nets. We spread the word far and wide in hopes that we will bring in another huge catch like the one that day at Gennesaret. Or we could think of ourselves as the net. We are the instrument the Lord uses to gather them in. But I wonder whether we might not better think of ourselves in terms of BAIT. Fish bait. A lot of us are simply born into the faith. That is the way new disciples are usually brought into the life of the church most times. Something attracts them, and most often it is you and me. Eighty percent of the people who join churches say they do it because someone, a friend or a relative invited them. WE are the BAIT.

There was a rural congregation stood near the intersection of five country roads. When the new pastor stuck red pins in a map to locate where the members lived, he noticed the majority clustered along the north/south road. While visiting an older parish member one day, the pastor asked, "Why do so many of our members live on the north/south road and not east or west?" "Years ago," she replied, "Joe and Melva Quimley lived up on the **north** road. Then they bought a farm on the **south** road and moved down there. The Quimleys were friendly, outgoing, delightful people. They were always inviting people to church. Not everyone they invited came, but some did! That's probably why so many of our members live on the north/south road." That Congregation had some Good bait.

Speaking of bait, I remembered another old fish story. It was a cold winter day like today. An old man walked out onto a frozen lake, cut a hole in the ice, dropped in his fishing line, and waited patiently for a bite. He was there for almost an hour, without even a nibble, when a young boy walked out onto the ice, cut a hole in the ice next to him. The young guy dropped his fishing line and minutes later he hooked a Largemouth Bass. The old man could not believe his eyes but chalked it up to plain luck. Shortly thereafter, the young boy pulled in another large catch. He kept catching fish after fish. Finally, the old man could take it no longer. "Son," he said, "I have been here for over an hour without even a nibble. You have been here only a few minutes and have caught a half dozen fish! How do you do it?" The boy responded, "Roo raf roo reep ra rums rram."

"What was that?" the old man asked. Again the boy responded, "Roo raf roo reep ra rums rarrm." "Look," said the old man, "I can't understand a word you're saying." The boy leaned over, brought his hand to his mouth and spat out a mess of bait. He said again, "You have to keep the worms warm!"

That young boy knew what attracted the fish. What kind of bait do WE use? Quite a few years ago the practice here at St. Peter's was for adults to come to worship and the children would go directly down to Sunday School. Families with children would come to worship with us. They'd look around and notice that there were no children in worship, and we'd never see them again. Now we welcome children to worship with us. They share in the liturgy, sing the hymns, participate in the Children's Chat and become BAIT for visiting families. If you're a family with kids and you see happy, smiling children enjoying worship, wouldn't you bite on this being a place you would want your family to come for worship?

Some people are looking for a church with good music. Our Pipe organ, Choir, Children's Choir and handbell Choir might be just the bait they need. Ministry Projects attract others to the Bait of Social Ministry where they can work with the Colonial neighborhood Council, or Laurel House, or the Silver Springs/Martin Luther School or the Baby Manna Program or World Hunger or Soles for Souls or our Souper Bowl program. Our Ministry Projects show that we are faithful to our mission to share the life, love and joy of Jesus Christ with others. We have not only been call to be Fishers of Men, but we are also called to be the bait! Let's make sure we're the type of bait that attracts what we're fishing for.

What was it that caught you? If it was a friendly greeting, be sure to give a friendly greeting to someone you meet. Was it the old Church Building with its beautiful Stained Glass Windows? If so, step up when we ask for help to maintain our beautiful facilities. Whatever type of bait it was that drew you into the net of Christ here at St. Peter's, help us to cast the net out to catch others.

One day Jesus walked down to the lake, told some tired fishermen to cast out their net, and from that day on they began to catch PEOPLE. We are called to fish for people! Let's make sure we have the Right Bait. Amen