

Pointers On Fishing

If Israel were to have license plates like Minnesota's, "Land of 10,000 Lakes," they would say on them, in Hebrew of course, "The land of one lake" because that's what they have. The Bible refers to it with three different names. It has been variously called the Lake of Gennesaret, the Sea of Tiberius or the Sea of Galilee. But whatever you call it, it has to be considered one of the strangest lakes in all the world. Not particularly large. It's fifteen miles by about six miles so it has about 650 square miles of surface area. Even though it's very small in size, it's surprisingly deep. Typically the depth ranges from around 120 to 155 feet. It's really a fresh water lake even though it's called a sea. It is bordered by mountains which make it very picturesque but also make it very prone to violence. Tumultuous life-threatening storms can quickly whip up in Galilee. But perhaps most unusual of all is that the surface of the Sea of Galilee is 650 feet below sea level making it an almost tropical climate.

Well, I'd like you to imagine it as best you can. And as long as you have your imagination going, I would like you to get into your imaginary fishing boat because we're going fishing this morning with Jesus. Our fishing story begins in Luke 5:1-11.

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God, he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

It's a great fish story. Jesus gave these guys some wonderful pointers on fishing but in the course of doing that he also gave to us some wonderful pointers on living. The first of them is rather common actually — woven through the fabric of the first four verses of Luke 5. It is, that Jesus begins great works with ordinary things. This was rather an ordinary day. You read the first four verses here and it's not very different from the rest of the stories of Jesus in the New Testament. He talked to people and he taught them, although not much is said here about what he actually taught.

On that particular day he was hard to hear and the people were pressed all around him so they could hear what he had to say. But you've been in a situation like that where you're trying to listen to someone. The people up close can hear very well but if you're the second or third or certainly the fiftieth row back you can hardly make out a single word that's being said. There's a temptation to ask other people, "What did he say?" But when everybody starts doing that and whispering and muttering back and forth it makes it even harder to hear.

Jesus noticed that there were two fishing boats over by the shoreline that weren't being used because the fishermen were cleaning their nets. Jesus walked over, stepped into the water and sat down in the boat. Now when he talked, he could be heard fine because he was out a few feet into the lake and he could project and they weren't crowded so tightly around him. It

was a rather ordinary day, a rather ordinary thing to do, pretty typical of the way things were then.

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Who do you think could have imagined that that day would be a turning point, a transformation not only in the lives of those people but in the history of the world? That on that day Jesus would take the ordinary and do the spectacular? Who would think that those who started out as fishermen would end up being apostles and that they would embark on an adventure that eventually would impact the population of the world and all of history for all of eternity?

It seems to me that when we're looking for God we are often prone to look for the spectacular — the loud voice or the brilliant light that comes from the

sky. And yet it is far more typical of God to work in the ordinary things of life — the simple days, the everyday occurrences. It's on a Sunday morning that otherwise probably wouldn't be distinguished from any other, or it's Monday going to school on the bus, or it's Tuesday coming home from work, or it's Wednesday at an ordinary appointment that's been scheduled for a long time. And there in the midst of the ordinary circumstances of life, God intervenes and does something that makes a huge difference. For he is the God not only of the spectacular but far more often the God who does his great works through ordinary things.

Jesus offers a second pointer on living in verse five where there's an example of circumstances seeming all wrong for what Jesus asked them to do. It was a most unlikely time for Jesus to ask what he asked. When he finished his teaching he asked them to push out farther into the lake, row into the deep water and cast out their nets. But Simon, also called Peter, knew it was a bad idea. In those days and still today, most all of the fishing that's done on Galilee is done at nighttime. Professional fishermen don't fish during daylight hours and it was morning.

Not only that, but they had already tried it and it didn't work. An experienced fishermen will tell you that when they're not biting, they're not biting. If they're not biting anywhere in the lake, going back an hour later isn't going to make them bite. They hadn't caught a minnow all night and it would be a futile effort.

Besides Peter and his partners (they were professional fishermen in business together) had grown up fishing and they were good at it. They knew fish. Jesus was a carpenter. He knew wood. What did he have to say to them? It was a waste of time.

Besides, they were tired. They had been up all night long. They had worked hard. And when you really try to do something that doesn't come together the way you want it to, often it's not just the physical exertion but it's the emotional drain that gets you down. In a situation like that you're not at your best. Someone might fall overboard. Or if a storm were to suddenly come across the horizon and to catch them far from shore, they wouldn't be at their sharpest and be able to deal with the dilemma. Even if they didn't say it, they must have thought, "Bad timing, Jesus, bad timing for this."

But they didn't know that Jesus does some of his best miracles at the most unlikely times. Jesus chooses to overrule circumstances or to work through them rather than conform to them. It's a lesson for us to learn. We are so prone to want all the circumstances to fall into place, for the timing to be exactly right. We want everything in life to come together so now

is the right time for the right thing to happen that God wants to do.

Unfortunately, that's not the way God usually operates. God doesn't wait for good circumstances. Often he prefers the bad circumstances, the most unlikely of times. And so he speaks his word, he reaches out and he touches our lives when we are far too busy for his word or for his touch. We're far too consumed with everything else. We think we know better than he knows what ought be done and how it ought be done.

Ah, but let us never tell Jesus that this isn't a very good time. The truth is that anytime he chooses is the best time and "hang" the circumstances. Jesus is the Christ of every circumstance and he may be ready to do his greatest work at our least convenient time.

Verse five has another pointer on living. Simon's answer to Jesus' request has to be one of the best lines in the Bible. He said, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

My first car was a 1941 Plymouth Coupe that cost fifty-five dollars because the brakes didn't work. So it would go, it just wouldn't stop. I was 14 years old and now from the vantage point of my age and experience I can't believe my parents let me do that. I talked to somebody about what to do to fix the brakes and this guy loaned me a manual to study. I borrowed a wheel puller to pull the brake drums and disconnected the lines and took out the shoes and the pistons. I hammered out the stuck pistons from the wheel cylinders and rebuilt everything until to my amazement and I think everyone else's the brakes worked. But then it wouldn't start. So I turned to another part of the book and started working on the engine. I put in new points and new spark plug wires, I did everything I could — jump starting, booster cables — it would turn over but it just wouldn't start!

Then one day when I'd just about given up, my father walked into the garage and looked under the hood and said, "Why don't you try connecting the ground wire to the distributor." Like most teenagers I assumed my father knew nothing about cars. I was surprised he could even drive one. I'm sure I thought to myself, "Dad, it's just not that simple. Besides, I've read the book." I knew he was wrong and frankly I just didn't feel like even bothering. But out of respect for my father, I did what he asked me to do. And the car started.

It was like Peter. "Jesus, because of what you say I will let down the nets." For most of us if we only did what we feel like doing in life, we would never do anything of value. Often we must make a choice between what we feel like doing and what we should do. Often we need to make that key decision.

The Minneapolis Star Tribune ran an article on March 14, 1992, about Albert Einstein. The article told some interesting things about him, his theory of relativity, his fame and some of his idiosyncrasies. One of his hobbies was playing the violin. In fact, it was what he liked to do best. He often practiced for hours everyday. What he really wanted to be was a concert violinist. He just wasn't quite as good at that as he was at physics and at math. But Einstein was smart enough to make the choice to do what he should do instead of what he felt like doing. The article said that there may have never been nor will ever be a mathematician or a physicist as bright as he. He was able to figure out the theory of relativity in his mind because he did what he should do rather than what he felt like doing.

It's another Jesus lesson for us to learn and to live. The key choices of life are often between what we feel like doing and doing what should be done. That leads us to a fourth pointer for living that Jesus gives in verses 4 through 7. It's the lesson that obedience brings results.

Jesus spoke this word and these fishermen obeyed. The results were abnormally abundant. "When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink."

You know what a big catch means for fishermen. It means prosperity, it means success, it means money. That was their livelihood. It was like a huge unexpected profit for someone in business. Or it would be like making it to the championship game for someone who is a professional athlete. Or it would be like a politician who wins the election or an author who is makes the best seller list.

Here the lesson is simple. Obedience to Jesus brings results. Not always these results but always good results. And you know, those who don't obey will never know. And those who do obey are never sorry with the results that Jesus gives. In some ways it's hard to understand why we are so reluctant to obey Jesus when he has such a fantastic track record.

If you had a financial adviser who was always right and every investment you made with her always ended up paying off big, with that kind of track record wouldn't you expect that the next prediction probably would be a good one? What Jesus asks of us always brings good results. You would think we would learn from that. That we would quit trying to get our own results through disobedience and go for his re-

sults through doing what he asks.

Which brings us to a fifth pointer on living in verses 8 through 10. Peter found that realizing who Jesus is makes us recognize what we are. "When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; I'm a sinful man.'" He and his friends were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken. They had never seen anything like it in all of their lives. Peter and the others were awestruck not just by the number of fish but by the realization of who Jesus was. This Jesus knew things that they didn't know and never would know. He had powers that were far beyond Peter's comprehension. This Jesus was God and in his presence Peter was scared.

At first glance, we think it's rather strange that in the aftermath of a miracle someone would say to Jesus, "Go away from me, I'm a sinful man." But we all tend to think we're okay, some of us think we're pretty great, until we stand next to someone who is far greater. It is then that we recognize that we are not quite what we thought ourselves to be.

Some years ago, maybe 14 or 15 years, I was invited by a Wooddaler to play racquetball at a private racquetball club in St. Paul. This wasn't just a healthclub that had racquetball courts. This place was for serious racquetball players and I think this guy was rated number one on the ladder in that club. When I got there I was questioning my judgment on being there and he made me an offer. He said, Leith why don't we play to 21 and I'll spot you 18 points. He also said, if you can't return my serve I'll take it over and won't count that as a score. I told him that wouldn't be necessary. Well, it wasn't a very long game. When it was over, I was soaked with sweat. I

was so exhausted I was ready to collapse on the floor. He was not sweating. He was not the least bit out of breath and he won 21 to 18. After that

game I didn't ever want to see him again for the rest of my life. And it wasn't just that he was so good, but I realized how bad I was.

I think that's a little of the way Peter felt that day. He was astonished, he was awestruck at Jesus and what he could do and who he was. He not only realized how good Jesus was, but how bad Peter was.

Frankly, that's part of becoming a Christian. Becoming a Christian is seeing Jesus as he is. That he is God. And that he is good, brilliant, righteous, powerful and wise, that he is perfect. And when we see him as he is, we see ourselves as we are. Up against him we see our sin, our stupidity, our weakness and our wickedness. For many of us the first response is to say to Jesus, "Get out of here, get away from me,"

...when we see him as he is, we see ourselves as we are.

because we don't want to look so bad by comparison. And so we ask him to get out of comparison's sight.

But Jesus has a better way. It is his sixth pointer for living. For that day, seeing Peter's fear, Jesus said to him, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." Jesus literally said, "Stop being afraid." He acknowledged that they were afraid. Jesus had and has a wonderful sensitivity about him where he, unlike many others, is able to read the emotions, the feelings, the fears of those whom he knows. And so he speaks a word of comfort, a word to chase the fears away.

Jesus gave more than a word. He also gave a call to service. He asked them to do something in part as a means to chase that fear away. But also as a means for these fishermen to become disciples and experience the ongoing presence and power of Jesus for the rest of their lives the way they had that day while fishing out on Galilee. What he did was to call them to be men-catchers. He asked them to go beyond catching fish and make the number one priority of their lives recruiting people for heaven.

We call it evangelism. It is convincing men and women to become disciples of Jesus Christ, to have their sins forgiven and their lives transformed and their eternal destinies guaranteed.

Think about it. What would any of us rather have at the end of our lives — a list of all the fish that we caught or a list of all the people that we had recruited out of the clutches of hell and into the promises and pleasures of heaven? This is what the church of Jesus Christ is all about! We're people catchers.

I know as often as it is explained there are some that have difficulty really understanding what the essence of the church is. But let it be said again, we are not here to be entertained or to entertain. We have not become a church in order to build a building or to give me a job or to make friends for ourselves. We exist to make disciples for Jesus Christ. Every program, every building, everything that we are about is to be targeted toward that single goal of people-catching.

And we are never satisfied. If we get one, we want two, get a thousand and we want ten thousand. No matter how many, there are never enough because we have been called by Jesus Christ to recruit men and women to be his disciples for now and forever. We need to understand that the church of Jesus Christ was never designed nor intended to be a cruise ship for pleasure but it is rather a fishing boat for people. Like Simon who is here listed with his partners, James and John, we, too, are partners together. We are partners who have heard and answered the call of Jesus Christ out of fear and into the service of people catching.

This leads to a seventh and a final pointer. These veteran fishermen did a most extraordinary thing. The story ends saying "they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him." These boats were their livelihood. They may have still owed money on them. In the boats was the biggest catch that they had ever seen in their lives — maybe the biggest catch ever recorded in the history of all of Galilee. And they were going to walk away from it at the very time that you would think they would be taking the fish to market. I mean, the shelf life of fish is not very long. They had at best a few hours to make the biggest amount of money ever. Time was of the essence and delay would be a disaster. But they left everything.

It would compare to someone making a livelihood off investing money. Buying a stock low, having it split once or twice, have it multiply ten times or a hundred times and sky rocket far beyond anything anyone had ever anticipated, and then to walk away from it. It would be like an athlete who had prepared a lifetime all the way up to the championship game and then not show up. Or a politician working and campaigning and winning the election and never taking office.

Why would anyone do such a thing? Simple. One would do such a thing in order to follow Jesus. It was clear to them that following Jesus was better than the biggest catch in all of history. It was clear to them that following Jesus is always better than anything else. And when we have really seen Jesus and when we have really decided to follow him, then for us, too, the comparison is clear.

It's not to say that following Jesus always means abandoning our boats or leaving our nets or some large catch behind, but it is saying that following Jesus always means that he is more important than anything else in life. It's also saying that making disciples is far better than making money.

Do you fish? If you're a fisherman then when someone who is a super fisherman gives you some really great pointers on how to do it, there's only one thing to do with those pointers and that's go fishing. And when Jesus gives us seven living pointers there's only one thing to do with them and that's for us to go and live them.

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