

March 30, 2008
 Revelation 1:9-20 / Luke 5:1-11
 Encountering Jesus and Being Made Fishers of Men

I was tempted to jump right into this passage and speak to you on verse 10 — where Jesus tells the disciples, *“Don’t be afraid; from now on you will catch men.”* Something Jesus phrases in a slightly different way on another occasion when he says in Matthew 4:19: *“Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”*

Keying in on that one verse I WAS going to skip over all the rest and simply share insights in regard to FISH and FISHING that can help us see certain things we need to do if we are ever to be fruitful in the task of evangelism.

But then I realized that to do so would be to rip that verse out of its context and ignore the first 9 verses of the text, which give us the groundwork for understanding it, and assure us that: Before any person can be an effective witness for Christ, they themselves must have had a personal encounter of their own with Christ. Before Simon Peter, James and John are called by Jesus to “catch other men,” they themselves must first be caught by Jesus! Before He commissions them to catch other people in a net they prepare, He catches them in a net He has prepared — by coming to them and revealing Himself to them in a very powerful, profound and life-altering way.

You see, at first it seems their meeting is all by chance or coincidence. Jesus just happens to be walking along the shore of Lake Gennesaret (also called the Sea of Tiberius or Galilee) and with a crowd pressing in upon Him he just happens to see a boat He can use as a floating pulpit, creating a distance between himself and the crowd, and in which He can sit down, and teach from.

So He walks over to one of the boats apparently resting with the front half dragged up onto the sand and the back half still in the water, climbs in and asks Peter (who is washing his nets after a night of fishing) to *“put out a little from shore”*— just 15- 20 feet maybe, so he can sit and teach the people.

But as we soon discover, it wasn’t merely “by chance” that Jesus came across those boats at that time and climb into Peter’s boat. Jesus had another reason for doing so. Not simply to have a boat to teach from, but even moreso, to reveal Himself to Peter in a way he didn’t to the crowd, and thereby “catch him, like a fish, for God.”

You see, there were many villages along that lake shore with a minimum of 15,000 people in each, and slews of boats moored down by the shore in front of every village. It wasn't like there was this long stretch of empty beach and only two boats Jesus could have used! No! Out of all the boats in that place, He specifically had His eye on these two particular boats.

And His eyes were not simply set on their BOATS! His eyes were set on THEM! So Jesus, after He finishes teaching, tells them, ***“Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.”*** ***“Master,”*** says Peter, ***“We’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything.”*** (ie: we’re tired and exhausted and you want us to go out again?!) But then he concedes ***“But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”***

So they row out to deep water, let the nets down, and pull in such a large catch of fish that it astonishes them! They’ve NEVER brought in such a large catch of fish! So large, in fact, that another boat has to be called over to help, and even then, the weight of the catch almost sinks both boats!

And what’s Jesus purpose? To help Peter, James and John become rich? Catch enough to help them pay off their house? No! It’s to reveal to them, by this miracle, exactly who He is, and by doing so bring them to faith in Him. And only AFTER He reveals Himself to them in such a way does He commission them to become fishers of men.

WHY? Because before anyone can be made into fishers of men, they themselves must be caught by the Supreme Fisher of Men! Before one can introduce other people to Christ, they must know Christ. And the way one comes to know Christ is by having a personal encounter with Christ whereby He reveals Himself to us. And it’s no less true today.

THEY encountered him in the flesh, and WE must encounter Him through the Spirit, but the truth still holds true in either case — We must have an encounter with Christ before we can come to know Him, and we must come to know Him before we can introduce others to Him. That’s the truth this entire passage is premised on!

You see, the huge catch of fish isn’t simply Jesus helping Peter out. It is Jesus revealing to Peter who He is, and by doing so, bringing him to believe.

In fact, the catch is so enormous that Peter comes to realize that the One standing in His boat isn’t simply a man. We know this because on seeing the immense size the catch Peter falls down at Jesus knees and says: ***“Go away from me Lord; I am a sinful man!”***

Why would he do that merely because the catch of fish was so big? And the answer is simple. You caught these fish at NIGHT! That's why Peter says, *"We've worked hard all NIGHT!"* You caught these fish with lanterns, at NIGHT! Because during the heat of the day they went down deep—to the cooler waters where they couldn't be caught by the nets!

Yet contrary to all reason — during the heat of the day when the fish are supposed to be at the bottom — they haul in a catch of fish that almost sinks both boats! And because of it Peter comes to realize Jesus didn't simply know where the fish were!

Somehow He had to have actually made the fish, contrary to their nature, swim up from the cool waters at the bottom to a level where they could be caught in the nets during the heat of mid-day!

That's why they were so astonished ("Phobos" in the Greek meaning shocked and amazed)! They were fisherman by trade who knew that you purposely went out on that lake at NIGHT because during the day the fish went down to the bottom, and therefore KNEW that to catch such an enormous quantity of fish during the HEAT OF MIDDAY was totally UNNATURAL!

Better yet, it could only be described as the work of someone who was SUPERNATURAL, making those fish do something they wouldn't ordinarily do — swim up from the bottom close enough to the surface to be caught during the heat of the day!

And when Peter grasps this, he falls down in fear, begging for mercy! WHY? Because the miracle convinces Peter that the One who stood in His boat possessed a power that only the CREATOR could possess — somehow calling the fish to swim up from the depths; somehow commanding the fish to do something contrary to their nature, and in such great numbers, that the catch nearly sinks both boats!

Peter knew that only the Lord of Creation could do that! Which is when it hits him — He a "sinful man" standing in the presence of the Incarnate God-man — he begs for mercy! He asks Jesus to "go away" for he knows he's not worthy to be in the presence of the Holy One.

And it's only after that — after revealing Himself to Peter, James and John in this way, that He says: *"Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men."* It's not until after they have been caught in the net Jesus spread for them (through this phenomenal miracle) that He commissions them to go and catch other men.

The same is true for us: We must be brought to faith in Christ before we can be fruitful in bringing others to faith in Him. We must ourselves be convinced sinners before we can ever be

effective and fruitful saints. We must be converted ourselves through an encounter with Jesus before we can be fruitful in the work of bringing about the conversion of others.

LISTEN: Anyone can share aspects of Christian truth with others (even an unbeliever) and God can use it to the conversion of their soul. But you can never be fruitful in “catching large numbers of fish” unless you yourself have first been caught in the net of His grace!

So, having said that, now we can look at verse 10 — and the call to catch men, or be fishers of men. And as we do what I’d like to point out to you are the parallels between fishing for fish and fishing for people! Because that’s what the text is all about — Jesus giving fishermen a lesson in fishing, and then using that lesson as an illustration of how to catch people!

When speaking inland to the FARMER, Jesus drew out the parallels between FARMING and evangelism. But now He’s on the shores of a lake, speaking to the FISHERMEN who lived in the towns around the Sea of Galilee, so with them He drew out the parallels between FISHING and evangelism – equating unbelievers to fish and believers to fishermen!

So let’s look at the parallels between fishing and evangelism.

And the **FIRST** and most obvious is this: As a general rule, fish do NOT jump into the boat by themselves. You must go after them! You must let the nets or your fishing lines down into the water!

I know that’s not true on all occasions as you know also if you watched the news this past week and saw that a 57 year old lady in a boat going 25 miles per hour was killed by a 75 pound Tiger Ray (sting ray) that actually jumped out of the water, hit her in the boat and the impact killed her. A freak accident.

In Honduras, as well, they have flying fish that have occasionally been known to jump out of the water and once in a very great while actually land in a boat! But that’s NOT the norm! And the fisherman who determines to wait for the rare occasion when a fish might perchance jump into his boat shows he knows little about fish, or fishing, and will never make a living at it!

Yet you know what? That is how most churches function when it comes to evangelism. They simply wait and hope that the “fish” swimming by the boat will jump in by themselves! They don’t go out and cast their lines into the lives of people, or let down their nets into the waters of the world.

They simply hope that unbelievers will “swim” by the church, pull into the parking lot of their own volition, walk into the sanctuary for morning worship, hear the preacher share the Gospel from the pulpit and be saved — having jumped in the boat by themselves!

And surely it HAS, on rare occasions, happened. But that’s not by any means the norm! You may gather in fish that have already been caught in Jesus net that way, but you rarely catch unbelievers who don’t already know Jesus that way!

Yet THIS passage is about is Jesus burden to reach the lost. The unbeliever. The person who doesn’t yet know Him! The sinner who has yet to be saved from their sins! The person who not yet experienced salvation of our God! THAT is the type of “fish” Jesus wants us to “catch” — the kind that don’t yet have the ability or desire to jump into or fly into the boat!

And LISTEN: To catch them you have to go where they are! You have to cast your lines where they live. You have to cast your nets outside the confines of the church!

Two of the greatest revivals in church history — the First Great Awakening here in America in the 1730’s and 40’s, and it’s counterpart across the ocean in England — were both fueled as a result of a two of evangelically minded men (Whitfield and Wesley) grasping the truth that the people they needed to reach MOST with the Gospel did not attend, and had no intention of attending a church!

So, as wise fishermen (realizing the fish weren’t coming near the boat) they left the organized church and started doing what churches should have been doing all along — going to where the schools of fish were — preaching and sharing in the streets and factories and docks and coal mines and market places — something they learned from Jesus — who did not stick to the synagogues or houses of worship, but took to the streets, preached His most famous sermon on the side of a mountain, sought out fishermen in their boats, and farmers in their fields and his friends in their houses!

“I love (to preach),” said John Wesley (founder of the Methodist Church) “in a commodious room... (standing behind) a handsome pulpit (that is, in a church), but field preaching is what saves souls.”

Which brings me to my **SECOND** point. Lest you misunderstand me, let me say I’m NOT in favor of “outdoor preaching” in the traditional sense. I saw it being done on the beach in Florida a few weeks back, and the young man (in my opinion) was doing more harm than good—unnecessarily

loud and somewhat demeaning in his attempts to convince them they were sinners — preaching grace very ungraciously.

That's why learning how to fish is helpful — because anyone who knows fish knows they are timid and easily spooked or scared away. It doesn't take long for a fisherman to learn that if he wants to catch fish he can't make a lot of noise! He needs to be quiet, walk with a soft step, and slow approach.

When I was about five years old, my uncle once invited me fishing. But he never invited me again! Because after ½ hour of catching nothing I started sloshing through the water with my cousin looking for flat rocks which we could skip across the water and see how many times we could get them rocks to hop—talking, splashing and making needless noise.

It was that day, on the ride home, that I learned my first lesson from a fishing pro — ***you don't make a lot of noise and commotion if you want to catch fish.*** In fact, given the ruckus we were making they were probably all on the other side of the lake, because fish are skittish! Fish are timid. You don't make noise or bang the oars on the side of your aluminum boat if you want to catch fish, because lot's of loud noise scares them away! (Yet that's what that young man on the dock in Florida was doing!)

You see, interestingly, Jesus (the Supreme fisher of men) gives us a clue here when He got into the boat and taught them sitting down. Went up onto the side of a mountain and taught them sitting down. Went into the synagogues and taught them sitting down!

WHY? Because it's a less threatening and more inviting posture. It is more disarming. The person comes down to your level and you feel they're sharing with you instead of preaching at you. He knew that. That unbelievers are like fish, and knowing the nature of fish, He didn't want to scare them away with a lot of loud yelling and ranting and raving before they had a chance to hear what he had to say! He didn't want to scare the fish off before He had a chance to catch them! And that's the goal.

So, by all means, we have to go where the schools of fish are! You can't drop your net in 2-3 inches of water and expect the fish to swim into it! You have to take your boat and go out where you know the fish congregate, and out there, in the deep waters of the world (outside the walls of the church) — the places people live and work and socialize.

You have to share about Jesus in a normal, caring, respectful, non-threatening, preferably not loud and boisterous way — and definitely not in a demeaning way — lest you “startle the fish” and they “swim away” before they have a chance to hear what you have to say.

Which brings us to a **THIRD** insight. We would be much more fruitful in our fishing endeavors if we would heed the guidance of Jesus and fish where He tells us to fish. And by that I mean listen for the people He directs us to.

What I mean is this: Many of us do not have the gift of an evangelist (myself included). I wish I did. I've even prayed for it, but I don't have it. My gift is discipling because evangelism does not come naturally to me. I'm like Timothy — I have to work at it!

Yet I have found this to be true: That if I pray and listen, God will often lay someone on my heart, burden me an intense desire to pray for their salvation (sometimes even waking me out of my sleep in the middle of the night to do so) and then He prompts me, through word and deed, to reach out to them in love, and when the moment is right, plant the seeds of the Gospel — or in light of today's passage, chum the waters by throwing out some bait.

That's how God works with me. And if I read this passage right, that's how he worked with Peter as well. It isn't simply that God tells us to go out in a “general way” to where people are at. He will also, as with Peter when it came to Cornelius in Acts 10 or Phillip when it came to the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 — lay certain individuals upon our hearts and then prompt us to pray and reach out and witness to that person in particular, through word and deed.

One time when I was praying in Westport, God laid four particular people on my heart. And so I started to pray for their salvation and build relationships with them and over time gradually share bits and pieces of the Gospel with them. (You don't move quickly at fish or pressure fish!)

The **FIRST** I led to Christ about 9 months before she died of Melanoma cancer at 41 years old. The **SECOND TWO** (a mother and her daughter) I baptized in the ocean (along with 19 other people) one month before I left that church to go to Honduras.

The **FOURTH** called me up and I lead her to Christ only days before she died (at 38 years old) of complications from Lupus.

The same thing happened in Honduras with a skeptic from Germany, a doubter from Virginia who visited church and vowed never to return (yet asked me to baptize her six months later) and a grandmother from England whom I baptized at 73 (or was it 78) years old.

I jokingly call them “goners” because I figure if God lays them on my heart it’s because He intends to have them for Himself, and He’s simply prods me to be one of the people He uses to bring that about (just as He intended to have the Cornelius and the Ethiopian Eunuch as His own and prompted Peter and Phillip to share the Gospel with them).

And I say that to encourage you. Because it means we’re not working alone! If I was, then like Peter I could work all night long, or throw my nets out at mid-day and catch nothing because they’d all be down on the bottom!

Yet the Good News is this: Jesus is working to bring the fish up from the bottom, into my nets, so I don’t have to be an experienced fisherman to catch them! I simply need to throw my nets in the water when and where He tells me to!

Which brings us to our **LAST** point, where Jesus tells them “Do not be afraid — from now on you will catch fish.” In the context it’s hard to say what the words ***“Do not be afraid”*** refer to. They may point back to the fear Peter sensed at being a sinner in the presence of the Holy One. Yet it also seems to point forward to the phrase “from now on you will fish for men,” and thus indicate that Peter understood the powerful revelation of Himself to them to constitute a call upon his life that would require him to leave his work as a as fishermen. And in that regard, Jesus seems to be saying to Peter, ***“That’s ok, don’t be afraid to leave the work you’ve always done, because I’ll teach you to fish for men.”***

Yet, isn’t that the perennial problem when it comes to evangelism? **FEAR?** I know few things Christians fear more than doing evangelism! In fact, that’s the primary reason we don’t!

We fear, like Peter, that we’re sinful, and how can a sinful person ever witness for Jesus? / We fear we’ll offend someone, or be rejected, or turn people off, or be made fun of, or say the wrong thing, or lose friends, or lose our job, or let God down, or have our life put under a microscope! (That does happen once you witness to someone — all of a sudden they scrutinize everything you do whereas before they never even noticed!)

So Jesus word to Peter is this: ***“Do not be afraid.”*** And let me say we need to hear Jesus saying that to us as well in relation to doing evangelism. And if we did, we would be far less anxious, and far more willing to enter into the restful, relaxing, creative, fun, and adventurous task called soul-fishing (or “man-fishing” as it used to be called).

I mean isn't the hardest part of fishing the most exciting part? Isn't the most strenuous part reeling in the fish once it's on the hook, and yet isn't that the most exciting part? Isn't that what makes the hardest part of the work seem like it's not work, and even energizes you?

You see, there are few things as exhilarating as the blessing of seeing someone come to faith in Jesus. There is no greater honor than knowing God used you to bring another human being to salvation in Christ! Nothing compares with it! Just as angels rejoice over one sinner who repents, so God let's us taste a bit of that same joy!

Yet you know what? Many Christians never get to experience that joy or the thrill of seeing someone come to Christ through their efforts, because they never take Jesus up on His offer to go fishing! (You see Mike, you're not the only one!)

Many Christians never get to experience the joy of the catch because they never climb into the boat / or put out to the deep waters / or bait the hook / or cast their line / or drop the net where Jesus tells them to. (And then they even have the nerve to say "Christianity is boring" — Of course it's boring if you turn Jesus down on His invitation to do the very thing that will make it exhilarating and exciting!)

And LISTEN: You don't need to be an expert! Because Jesus says, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." Peter knew how to fish, but Peter didn't know how to fish for men! For that He needed Jesus to teach him!

And the same is true for you: You don't need to know all there is to know on how to fish for people before you get started! In fact, we need to remember the call of Jesus in this passage is really little more than a call to LET HIM SHOW YOU WHAT HE CAN DO if you'll simply say, like Peter, "I'll do it because you say so."

If you wait till you think your ready you'll never do it! / Just jump in and remember He says, "I will make you fishers of men." "From now on you will catch fish." Not because you have what it takes / and not because you're well trained in the art of man-fishing — but simply because "Jesus will be with you, and train you, and for that reason you will catch fish."

After all, even a novice can catch fish when Jesus sovereignly calls them up from the bottom of the lake and into the net He tells you to let down into the water! And don't think Peter missed that message! All you need to do is bait the hook or chum the waters with little truths of the Gospel and cast your line or throw your nets into the water. God will bring the fish to them!